

Ao Oni: Grudge

Kenji Kuroda

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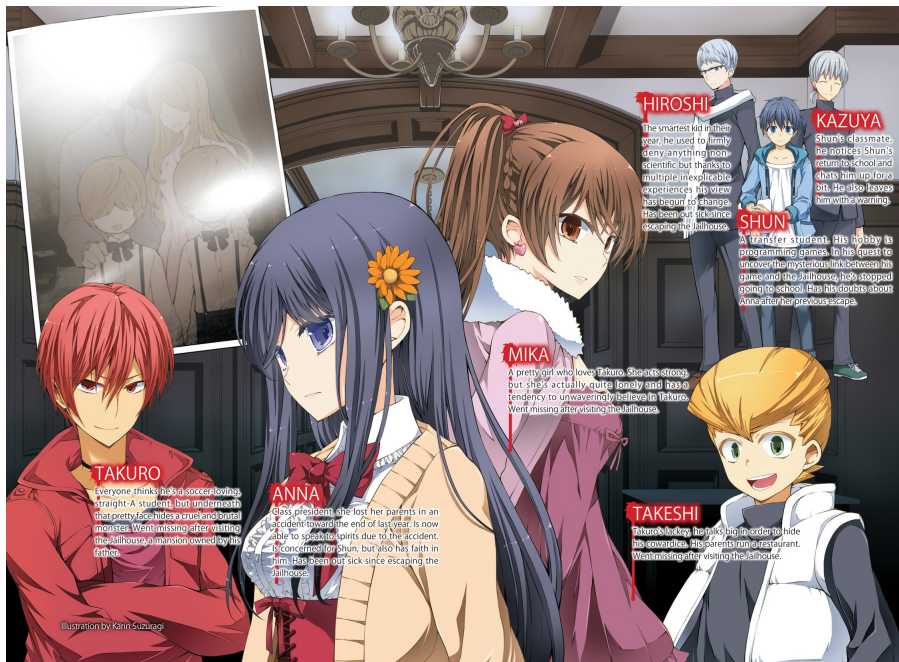
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Illustrations: Karin Suzuragi



Illustration by Karin Suzuragi



TAKURO

Everyone thinks he's too overconfident, straight. A student, but underneath that pretty face hides a cruel and brutal monster. Went missing after visiting the jailhouse, a mansion owned by his father.

Illustration by Kenji Suzuki

ANNA

Glass president, she lost her parents in an accident toward the end of last year. Is now shy to speak, partly due to the accident. Is concerned for Shun, but also has faith in him. Has been out sick since escaping the jailhouse.

MIKA

A pretty girl who loves Takuro. She acts strong, but she's actually quite lonely and has a tendency to unwaveringly believe in Takuro. Went missing after visiting the jailhouse.

HIROSHI

The smartest kid in their year, he used to firmly deny anything non-scientific but thanks to multiple inexplicable experiences, his view has begun to change. Has begun to advance escape the jailhouse.

KAZUYA

Shun's classmate. An athletic Shun's return to school and shuts him up for a bit. He also leaves the matter running.

SHUN

A transfer student. His hobby is programming games. In his quest to discover the mystery of his game and the jailhouse, he's stopped going to school. Has doubts about Anna after her previous escape.

TAKESHI

Takuro's bodyguard, he's quick to get orders. Hide his swordsmanship. His parents run a restaurant. Went missing after visiting the jailhouse.



NAOKI

Takuro's and Takeshi's former classmate who died in an accident. He's now a ghost looking for vengeance. His plan involves luring them to the Jailhouse, where the monster resides.

Illustration by Karin Suzuragi

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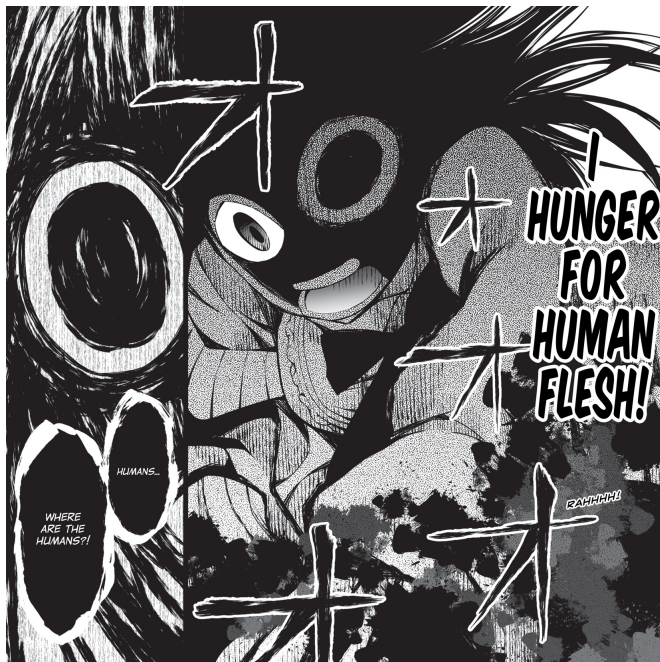
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THAT RIGHT
NOW, SHE'S
REALLY...

...JUST A
MONSTER IN
DISGUISE...



I DON'T
WANT TO
BELIEVE...

...THAT ANNA
WOULD DO
ANYTHING
LIKE THAT.

GRIT
ギ



HUH...?



IT'S THE
JAIL-
HOUSE.

WE'RE
HERE,
SHUN.



Chapter 1

FORMAT

Format

1

The cold wind stabbed at his cheeks. Shun's eyes crinkled at the sight of the middle school he hadn't been to in three weeks. But not because he had fond memories there. The memories that *did* surface in his mind were far from pleasant. Stopping in front of the school gate, he looked up at the gray sky. Cold, hexagonal crystals mercilessly soaked his cheeks. Wiping under his eyes, he looked around again.

Other than the snow covering the school building that had built up overnight, there was nothing out of the ordinary. It was as if he was back on the very first day he'd refused to come to school. Familiar students passed by Shun as they made their way towards the building. No one said hi even though they hadn't seen him in weeks. They wouldn't even meet his gaze. He felt intensely out of place. It was like he was just some pebble on the side of the road.

However, strange as it might be, Shun actually preferred things this way. He had to laugh at himself for shivering with anxiety at the thought of having to endure stares. It seemed he wouldn't have to worry about that. He put his hand to his chest, took a few deep breaths, and turned the corner to step through the gate.

His shoes squeaked like cute little animals as he walked through the snow. Listening to it lightened his heart with every step. He told himself that everything would be fine. Yet, as he approached the classroom, he couldn't help feeling a little nervous. Scanning the room from the doorway, he didn't see Hiroshi. He was apparently extremely fatigued and dehydrated after the ordeal, so perhaps he was just resting for the time being.

I'll go visit him after school.

A few students ran past Shun. One bumped his shoulder, and he staggered slightly. He'd only stand out more if he stayed in the doorway forever. So, letting out a quiet breath and gathering his courage, Shun stepped into the classroom.

None of his nightmare scenarios played out.

A gaggle of girls were giggling over in the corner. A few of the boys were pretending to have a battle with cleaning supplies. There were even some splayed out on their desks asleep, clearly having stayed up all night reading comics or something. It was as peaceful as a normal school day could get.

Looking at the floor, Shun hurried over to his seat in the back by the window. There wasn't a speck of dust on it, as if someone had kept it clean while he was gone. He sat down and took out his textbook.

"Good morning. Haven't seen you in a while," one of his classmates said.

He felt slightly relieved. Prying eyes would have been the death of him, but that didn't mean he wanted to be completely ignored. It was like he was a ghost or something.

"You feeling better now?"

The boy was thinner than Shun and had eyes so narrow that they looked like they could have been drawn in a single stroke. He looked familiar, but Shun couldn't recall his name. It wasn't too long after transferring that he'd stopped coming to school, so it wasn't all that surprising. Seemingly picking up on this, the boy introduced himself.

"I'm Kazuya."

Perhaps it was just written all over Shun's face.

"I know you just moved here. Must have been hard, huh? Pneumonia, was it? I caught that when I was younger, so I know how tough it can be. Are you okay now, though? You still look a little pale. You probably shouldn't push yourself."

"Oh... yeah, I'm fine. I'm all better. Thanks for the concern."

Shun hesitatingly played along. His mother or the teacher must have lied in order to keep from making the situation worse. He was grateful.

It was doubtful anyone would believe him if he said it had all started with Takuro's bullying. He was always wearing the mask of a model student, so most likely no one knew his real personality. Shun perfectly understood why none of his classmates had really questioned why he'd stopped coming to school. And yet, that disquieting feeling he'd gotten since coming today wouldn't leave him.

Why isn't anyone talking about the incident from two days ago?

The two violent deaths discovered at the Jailhouse had made big news on TV and in the papers. Moreover, one of the victims was the president of Smile, Takuro's father. And three of their classmates—Takuro, Mika, and Takeshi—were currently missing. The police investigation was still ongoing, but there had been no news or leads.

Shun had seen a TV reporter speculate, with a knowing look, that someone must have been living in the Jailhouse illegally. They thought that when Takuro's father had visited the mansion, they'd had an argument that had turned into an altercation. According to them, Takuro and his friends had been taken as hostages. But that couldn't be more wrong. Takuro's father's killer wasn't a person. It was a giant monster with blue skin. Takuro, Mika, and Takeshi had all been eaten by it after entering its lair, the mansion.

They weren't the only victims, however. A week ago, Shinichi and Kota had trespassed there for fun and ended up monster food, too. In only ten days, five of their classmates had gone missing. Yet no one was talking about it. It was utterly bizarre. Especially since they'd all died after setting foot in the Jailhouse. Before, class breaks had always been filled with the latest buzz about the haunted old mansion. Everyone had to be thinking it: "They were killed by the monster." So why wasn't anyone saying anything?

"Hey..."

Baffled by his classmates' apparent disinterest, Shun conjured his courage and decided to ask.

"Did you hear about what happened at the Jailhouse?"

The color instantly drained from Kazuya's face.

"You shouldn't talk about that," he whispered and quickly shuffled back to his desk.

"...Huh?"

Shun was left staring at him blankly. It was such a stark change from his casual demeanor not five seconds ago. He had no idea what had just happened.

Suddenly, Shun felt an intense stare fall on him from the opposite corner of the room. He looked up to see that the girls who had been so engrossed in chatting earlier were now all looking at him. Each one had the same blatant look of fear on their face. When their eyes met his, they quickly looked away and began talking about something else. Their laughter sounded almost hollow to him.

"What was that?" he muttered to himself and glanced around the room.

It had looked like the very image of a normal classroom when he first came in, but something was definitely off. Shun couldn't really explain it, but it was as if there was a tension in the air. On the surface, no one seemed to care about the Jailhouse incident. But that wasn't it at all. It was like they were just pretending not to care.

The bell rung, signaling the beginning of class, and the students sluggishly took their seats. A few desks were empty. Shun looked at each one of them in turn. Takuro... Mika... Takeshi... They had all been attacked and killed by the Jailhouse monster. Their bodies hadn't been found because it had scarfed down even their bones. Shun's gaze stopped at certain desk by the window.

Anna...

His chest hurt, like it was being squeezed in a vice. He recalled the two of them heading into the hills behind school after being released from the police interviews. That was two days ago.

"What's the matter, Shun?"

Her pupils as she'd turned around were wide open and empty, just

like the blue monster's. It was capable of instantly analyzing the DNA of creatures it consumed and then morphing into them. And the transformation wasn't just physical. It could also copy its victim's memories, which made things even worse. He'd never expected that Anna had already been killed.

After realizing Shun was onto her, Anna had disappeared. He hadn't heard anything about her going missing, so it seemed likely she was still pretending to be human. That was the reason Shun had decided to return to school after skipping for three weeks. He had no idea what the monster masquerading as Anna was planning. There hadn't been any rumors of a monster running about the neighborhood or anyone going missing, so it had to be lying low for the time being.

The monster had quickly gained intelligence after learning from the internet. It had to know that attacking people left and right would quickly spark a counteroffensive. All was well as long as the monster behaved itself in Anna's form, but there was no telling when it would bare its fangs. Shun recalled the old woman who was attacked in the hospital three days prior. If that had been Anna's doing, there was certainly a chance the tragedy might repeat itself.

The easiest targets would be their classmates. No one would be alarmed if Anna approached them. The monster just might be clever enough to obtain food without alerting the world to its presence. But Shun wouldn't let the monster have its way. He swore to himself he wouldn't let that happen.

If the monster does show up at school as Anna, I have to protect everyone.

No one would believe him if he started saying that Anna was the monster. So Shun had steeled his resolve and come to school himself so that he could act as quickly as possible if it did show up.

Anna...

He gazed at her empty desk with a heavy heart. It was something of a relief not to see her. If she had come to school and done something like try to walk off with another girl during a class break, he would have been forced to restrain her himself.

Shun bit his lower lip. Death was a sad and terrible thing. He'd lost his beloved grandparents to illness, so he knew all too well how hard it was. The moment you lose someone, that's when the sadness is at its greatest. But eventually it fades, little by little. That's what it had been like in the past. But this time was different.

As long as that monster existed in this world, Anna would never rest in peace. Every time Shun saw it passing itself off as her, his heart would overflow with sorrow. He had to put a stop to it. He had to kill it.

Bright red blood dripped from his lip. He'd been biting too hard.

Somehow, he had to kill that fearsome monster. But from the outside, it would look just like he was killing Anna with his own hands.

Can I... do that?

2

Time passed quietly in relative peace. Shun caught himself yawning out of boredom during his classics class. This shocked him. He'd always been too nervous since transferring schools to even think about yawning. Especially after Takuro's bullying began. Would Takuro summon him behind the school building after class? What outrageous violence would he be forced to endure this time? These questions had always kept him on the edge of his seat.

But it wasn't like he'd suddenly blended in and become part of the class, either. He was tense after skipping for so long—that was fact. However, compared to being trapped in the Jailhouse, these nerves were nothing.

A swallow swooped past the window. Down below in the courtyard, some younger students were enjoying a snowball fight. It was peaceful. So peaceful, it was actually alarming. Was it really okay for him to just be lounging around?

In the midst of his mental wanderings, the students seemed to have gathered in a corner of the courtyard. They were focused intently on the snow-covered animal hutch. As Shun recalled it, there were two rabbits housed there. He'd taken a peek inside once. The rabbits were both dingy and unfriendly. He could hardly bring himself to call them cute. And honestly, they were quite unpopular. He'd never seen students gather around their hutch before. What was going on? For some reason, he felt an uneasiness in his chest.

Suddenly, the classroom door burst open, and the principal appeared. Shun nearly had a heart attack from the shock. Worry cropped up on the other students' faces.

"Did... Did they find the bodies?"

"Don't talk about that. You'll be cursed, too."

Shun could hear his classmates whispering.

Cursed...? What are they talking about?

The principal looked to the class and asked that Anna come with him to his office immediately.

"Um... Anna's out with a cold, sir," a girl in the front row piped up.

"I see. That's fine, then. Sorry to disturb your class."

The principal's speech was polite as always, but there was a palpable tension in his voice.

“What’s up with Anna?” another student asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” the principal replied and left the classroom in a hurry.

For a moment the buzz of chatter filled the room, but the language arts teacher silenced the class with a word. The talking continued in the form of hushed murmuring.

“Anna’s a victim now, too?”

“Shh! Seriously, don’t! You want to be cursed?”

Why was the principal looking for Anna? Had the monster done something heinous already? The unease grew and grew in Shun’s chest. In an attempt to calm himself, he looked out the window.

The younger students were still huddled around the hutch. Someone in the group was shouting loudly. But whatever it was about, Shun couldn’t hear with the window closed. He stared hard, carefully watching the lips of the boy making a fuss.

B...L...O...O...D...

Blood? His pulse quickened.

T...O...R...N...E...A...R...

That was all he could manage to glean before the bell rang. On the vice-class representative’s signal, the class all stood and bowed to the teacher.

Shun looked out the window again, but the crowd around the hutch had been dispersed by the gym teacher. He couldn’t stop thinking about what could have happened there. He made up his mind to go investigate during the break, but as it turned out, he wouldn’t have to. As he was putting away his textbook, a girl from the class next door came running in and started talking about it.

“My brother just told me they found blood in the rabbit hutch!”

“What? How? Are the rabbits okay?”

“Apparently they’re missing. They’re searching the whole school, but they haven’t found anything.”

“Why was there blood? Is this someone’s idea of a prank?”

“I can’t say for sure, but... there were two pairs of rabbit ears in the coop.”

Shun pretended to prepare for the next class while eavesdropping on the disturbing chatter.

“Ears? What the heck? That’s gross. Maybe the rabbits fought and tore each other’s ears off? Then they ran off because of the fight?”

“I don’t think so. The hutch was supposed to be locked. There was no way for them to get out. Someone must have stolen them. But then that would mean someone tore off their ears, too...”

The fearsome visage of the Jailhouse monster rose up in the back of Shun’s mind.

It can’t be...

“God, that’s so creepy. Who would do that?”

“They wouldn’t share much, but apparently a student’s name tag was found in the hutch.”

“So they’re the culprit?”

Shun was nearing the end of his rope. He could now guess why the principal had come storming into the classroom.

Could the student’s name be...?

He suddenly felt sick. He almost threw up on the spot. Pressing down on his chest, he hurriedly stood up. The sudden force of it knocked his chair over backward, sending it clattering loudly to the floor. The students nearby all worriedly looked over at Shun.

“What’s the matter? You don’t look so good...”

“Sorry. I need to go to the nurse’s office,” he said simply and fled the classroom.

He ran down the hall and out the building, still in his indoor shoes. Once out in the courtyard, he felt a little better. Sucking in the freezing cold air, his racing heart began to settle. A few teachers were now gathered around the hutch. The principal was with them, a difficult expression on his face.

A little farther away was a group of students watching the teachers. They must have heard the rumors and come running to investigate. When they tried to approach, the guidance counselor shooed them away. Judging from the teachers’ reactions, the hutch was in quite a state. Shun would simply be shooed away too if he tried to approach. So, abandoning that idea, he stood there in thought.

Did the blue Jailhouse monster attack the rabbits? I don’t know why something that eats even the bones of its victims would leave behind just the ears, but if this is its handiwork, then there must be some evidence of it nearby.

The monster was no idiot. If someone caught it and raised the alarm, it’d become much more difficult to survive. It had to at least understand that much. That must be why it had gone after the rabbits and not a human victim. But once it had the rabbits, wouldn’t it want to find somewhere secluded to enjoy its food? Shun knew the perfect spot.

Turning his back on the hutch, he began walking along the school building.

3

Passing through the narrow gap barely big enough for a person, Shun reached the rear of the school building. Stacks of concrete blocks shielded him from sight. Thick groves of cypress trees created a dead

angle so that, even looking from the school windows, this spot was a complete void. And Shun knew it all too well—this was where Takuro had dragged him time and again to inflict his merciless torture. Just being there brought back horrible memories. Shun's knees began to shake.

But he shook his head to free himself from such thoughts and looked around. There were only a handful of people in the school who knew about such a secluded place on campus.

Takuro, Mika, Takeshi... and Anna.

Anna had known this was where Takuro would bully Shun. According to her, she'd learned of it from a ghost that haunted the science lab. If the monster that escaped from the Jailhouse had Anna's memories, then it would surely know this was a safe place to come dine in peace. Shun carefully searched the area for any traces of its presence.

Thanks to the cypress branches overhead acting like a roof, there was hardly any snow on the ground here. That allowed him to spot what he was looking for with ease, although he really would have preferred not to see it at all.

"Hngh... Hrk..."

His stomach flipped. He tried to hold it in, but couldn't. Shun threw up multiple times at the horrific sight. In the distance, the warped sound of a bell signaling the start of class rang out.

Next to a noticeably thick cypress tree were two rabbit heads huddled close together.

Chapter 2

SASAYAKI

- WHISPERS -



Shun ended up feeling so sick that he spent that afternoon in the nurse's office. As he lay in bed looking up at the white ceiling, he couldn't help but recall everything that had happened in the Jailhouse. It only unsettled him more. He tossed and turned restlessly until the final bell rang.

Once school was over, he felt much better. Perhaps he'd just been that anxious about returning to class. The hellish days of enduring Takuro's bullying must have affected him more than he'd imagined, and they still had a terrible hold over his heart.

Thanking the nurse, Shun left the infirmary. He went back to the classroom to grab his bag, and could hear some of his classmates whispering to each other as he approached. Peeking in from the doorway, he surveyed the room. It was two female students with grave looks on their faces. There was no one else there. He couldn't just barge in, so instead, he waited by the door with bated breath.

"Hey, you know that email everyone in class got?"

Email? What're they talking about?

Shun was confused.

"You think it was true?"

"Don't, Yukari. You can't talk about that at school. That's what it said, remember?"

"Anna didn't come to school again."

The short-haired girl named Yukari suddenly mentioned Anna's name. Shun hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but he couldn't help hearing that part. His palms began to sweat.

Their conversation continued.

"I think maybe she was eaten by the Jailhouse monster, too... I was worried, so I called her during lunch."

"And?"

"She was at home. Apparently she caught a cold."

"Oh, is that it? Jeez, you scared me for a second there."

"Well, something was weird. I can't explain it, but she seemed different from the normal Anna."

Shun couldn't hide his surprise. Carefully, so as not to be noticed, he leaned in through the doorway to get a better look at the two girls. The short-haired one he'd seen plenty of times before with Anna. They were probably pretty close. Really close, even, if she could discern from just a phone call that it wasn't the real Anna. Shun had been none the wiser up until seeing her strangely blue, wide-open eyes after spending an entire night with her.

“But she isn’t the only one who hasn’t come to school for two days. That super studious guy... What was his name?”

“Hiroshi?”

“Yeah, him. He was always going on about how monsters couldn’t possibly exist. Maybe he was killed, too.”

“Now that I think about it, I remember seeing them together a lot recently... Huh? Did she get mixed up with him?”

Shun was so focused on their conversation that he didn’t notice another one of his classmates approaching from behind.

“What’re you doing out here?” someone said, tapping him on the shoulder.

Shun reflexively yelped, and the two girls in the classroom turned around at the same time.

“You spent all day in the nurse’s office ’cause you were feeling sick, right? You should have listened to me. I told you to take it easy.”

It was Kazuya. He was wearing a white lab coat, perhaps a member of the science club.

“Oh... yeah, thanks. But I’m really okay now.”

As Shun fumbled for a response, the two girls exited the classroom. They hurried by silently, not making eye contact.

“What’s with them? Weirdos,” said Kazuya, lips pursed.

“Hey,” Shun said as he turned to him. “What’s this about an email everyone got?”

Kazuya’s expression changed dramatically. It was the same reaction Shun had gotten when he’d asked him about the Jailhouse that morning.

“I haven’t been to school in so long, I’m out of the loop.”

“Huh? You didn’t get it?” Kazuya’s wide eyes stared straight at Shun. “But why? Because you’re new? Or because you weren’t at school? You weren’t the sender, were you?”

Kazuya’s lips were trembling. He was clearly afraid. Shun finally realized his impression that the class had been too peaceful on his first day back was all wrong. A mysterious ghost was haunting class 2-3, and Kazuya’s endless shivering caused a new fear to bloom in Shun, as well.

2

Shun practically fled from school to the only public phone in town, punched in Hiroshi’s home phone number, and asked if he could come visit him immediately. Of course, this sick visit was just an excuse to see him. In truth, Shun was beyond worried. His classmates were incredibly afraid of something. As long as he didn’t

know what that was, he couldn't rest.

"There's no need to come to my house. I will head to you," Hiroshi said calmly.

"Huh? Are you better now? It's really cold today, so maybe you shouldn't go outside—"

"No need to worry. In fact, it would be more detrimental to my health to stay cooped up here."

"You're not forcing yourself, are you?"

"No, not at all."

"Really?"

Hiroshi was always as cool as a cucumber, so sometimes it was hard to read him. Even for Shun.

"Let's meet at the usual spot in 30 minutes," Hiroshi said.

"The usual spot?"

"The hills behind school."

That was where they'd played Shun's computer game together. It had only been three weeks since they last saw each other there, yet it seemed like an eternity ago.

"Got it. See you in 30 minutes, then."

With that, Shun finished their conversation and hung up. He was concerned about Hiroshi's health, but he was also grateful that he'd get to talk to him without having to meet Hiroshi's family. It wasn't like his natural shyness had suddenly gone away.

3

Shun headed for the hills behind school to meet with Hiroshi. He made sure to buy him a get-well gift from the convenience store along the way and everything.

The snow was deeper than Shun had expected. It even came up to his shins in places. The air was seasonably chilly, but walking in the snow was so arduous that by the time Shun reached their rendezvous point, he was so hot that he wanted to rip his jacket off.

Complicated emotions came over him as he stared at the familiar marsh. Thin ice had formed on the water's surface. He looked to the sky. With evening setting in, the clouds had parted just enough that a bit of blue was visible. There was no sign of the biting cold letting up, however. Even with gloves on, Shun's fingertips were numb.

Within a few minutes, Hiroshi arrived. Slight bags remained under his eyes. His cheeks were also a bit more gaunt than they had been two days ago. It was worrying, but Shun was mostly just happy to see him.

"Um... here."

Shun handed over the present he'd bought.

"Thank you very much. I was just craving something sweet. This will be good."

Hiroshi wasn't one for niceties, so if he said he was grateful, Shun knew it was the truth. In fact, he dug into the pudding cup right away.

"This is good," he said with no expression.

Even so, Shun was delighted. He then took out a pudding cup for himself. They couldn't sit in the snow, so both just stood there together. It was something of a strange way to eat pudding. Shun chuckled to himself.

When they were done, Shun explained what had happened at school. Hiroshi listened intently, not interrupting once.

"So you believe the rabbit killer was the monster with the ability to morph into Anna?" he asked when Shun was done. "Still, ripping off the ears at the hutch and leaving the heads behind the school building... I thought that blue monster would have a bit more manners than that."

Shun pressed down on his throat at the thought of the horrific scene under the cypress tree. If it was a joke, it wasn't funny. Then again, he doubted Hiroshi was making a joke.

"If it does anything to stand out and raise an alarm, it will be caught sooner rather than later. Thus, the monster attacked the rabbit hutch and took its meal out behind the school building where no one would see it—that is your line of thinking, yes? But if that's true, then why leave the ears and heads? Does that not seem contradictory?" Hiroshi said plainly as he pushed up his glasses frames.

He had a point. Shun was embarrassed that he may have jumped to conclusions.

"By the way, what's this thing about everyone in class getting an email?" That was what Shun was really dying to get an answer about. "Did you get it too, Hiroshi?"

"Oh? You didn't?"

Shun shook his head. He felt a little awkward, like he'd been left out of something.

"Two days ago around noon, after I had been released from police questioning and returned home, I saw an email. It was sent earlier that day at about eight in the morning. The subject line read: 'Vengeance to commence.' I believe the sender was 'J's monster.'"

"Was there anything in the email?"

"I have a copy of it here. Would you like to see?"

With that, Hiroshi took out a familiar-looking tablet PC. It had originally come from the Jailhouse, but apparently he'd managed to keep it from being confiscated by the police.

"I had only used desktops before, but this is actually quite

convenient. My fieldwork is going to get much more productive, I can tell.”

Shun was simultaneously stunned that Hiroshi could, without hesitation, use a cursed item that had caused such disaster, as well as reassured. He took the tablet and looked into the orangey glow of the screen. Just as Hiroshi promised, he'd pulled up a copy of the email from “J's monster.”

*To everyone of Iwano Middle School's Class 2-3,
Warning. Your class is cursed. You know why. My curse has already
claimed five victims. It will not cease until you are all dead. Know the
graveness of the sin you have committed and regret it. Don't bother going to
the adults. If you tell anyone about this curse, you will be next.
-J's monster*

Shun finally understood what was really behind the strange mood in the classroom. The first thing that popped into his mind after reading the email was that “J's monster” was short for “Jailhouse monster.” After all, the five victims mentioned in the message were all classmates that had last been seen at the Jailhouse. That was why no one wanted to talk about it. It was no wonder Kazuya's attitude had changed the moment Shun brought it up.

Naturally, there were some who thought this was nothing more than a prank. But as long as most of the class was taking it seriously, there would be no talking to anyone about it. Some may have even already gone to the teachers or other adults, but they were most likely scolded for getting worked up about spam mail. Nothing would have come of it.

That girl who'd broached the subject after school, Yukari, most likely thought it was a prank. So did Hiroshi. Shun didn't believe it, either. He wasn't as skeptical as Hiroshi, but he still didn't believe in curses. Having experienced the afterlife for himself once before, he was certain on that matter.

“Who could have sent this?” Shun asked.

“The sender used a free email service, so there's no way to discern who did it,” Hiroshi replied.

“I wonder why I didn't get this email,” Shun wondered out loud.

“Perhaps they simply didn't know your email address. We made a list of everyone's during the fall festival so we could all contact each other, which was before you transferred in.”

“Who kept that list?”

Perhaps they could find the sender that way.

“I... don't know. My apologies. I don't much keep up with class activities.”

Typical Hiroshi.

“It wouldn’t be strange for the class representative to have the list, would it?”

“You mean to suggest Anna is the sender?”

Shun nodded.

“To be precise, the monster disguised as Anna,” he clarified.

“But why? As I explained earlier, its main priority should be to blend into human society without creating any fuss. I doubt it would send such a taunting email and call attention to itself. Furthermore, Anna knows your email, does she not?”

Maybe I didn’t get one because Anna had special feelings for me.

Or was that too vain to consider?

“We should regard this email as a prank, in my opinion. However, there is no guarantee Anna will not make a move in the future. We will need to get down to figuring out this problem right away.”

Something about what Hiroshi said struck Shun. It wasn’t Anna, but the monster in Anna’s form that posed a danger to the town. But getting defensive and objecting on that point wouldn’t change anything, so Shun quietly let it slide.

“There is one thing I would like to try. Could you pass me the tablet?”

“Oh... sure.” Shun handed it over, cocking his head quizzically. “What are you testing?”

Hiroshi answered without any hint of change in his expression, “It might be possible to eliminate the monster.”

Chapter 3

ODOROKI

-SHOCK-



Time practically stood still.

"It might be possible to eliminate the monster."

What Hiroshi had said was such a shock that Shun stood there breathless. He coughed violently, desperately trying to pull oxygen into his body.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"I still don't understand why, but the game you made and the Jailhouse are closely interlinked. For some reason, the game is reflected in reality—is this correct?"

Shun nodded. "But once the monster started to learn, it used the internet and the tablet to set up a trap to corrupt the game the next time I booted it up. I can't even play it now, much less alter it."

"What about a backup?"

Shun shook his head. "My whole hard drive was wiped."

"Did you happen to save anything on external memory?"

"No. I know I should have, but it's too late now. Actually... there's one option left."

The very first version he'd created was burned to a CD-ROM. He should still have that. It was basically the alpha, and was never meant to be seen by anyone else.

"Then please destroy that, as well," Hiroshi said instantly.

"Huh?"

"I realize it's likely very difficult to destroy your work with your own hands, but we need to make sure the game never sees the light of day again."

"What are you talking about?"

"The monster corrupted the hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of copies of the game downloaded via the internet. There may still be some people whose games are unaffected, but as soon as they boot it up again while connected to the internet, theirs too will be lost. That will solve our problem, but it means the only working copy of the game remains the one installed on this tablet."

"Oh, I see."

Shun smacked his fist into his palm. He realized what Hiroshi was getting at.

"My game and the real-world Jailhouse are closely connected, so if we manipulate the game to our advantage..."

"They were most likely afraid of that, which is why the game on the tablet is now password protected. It seems impossible to access it otherwise. But that's not an obstacle. If we do a factory reset, all data

on the tablet—including the sole surviving copy of the game—will be erased. I have no proof this will work, but perhaps in doing so, the monster will also be erased.”

Shun understood Hiroshi’s plan perfectly. After all, he’d already considered it himself multiple times.

“May I erase all the data on the tablet, then?” Hiroshi asked.

However, Shun had trouble answering. It wasn’t that he was sad to see the game he’d worked months on be destroyed. He could always make another one. There was another reason he was hesitating.

“If we delete the game, will the monsters that escaped the Jailhouse also disappear?” he asked, thinking of Anna.

“There is no way to know. They may, or they may not. There are too many uncertain variables. All I can say is that there’s a chance they will—that’s all.”

“We don’t know if the monsters with Takuro’s and Mika’s consciousnesses are dead for sure, either. If they’re still alive—”

“What a peculiar thing to say. Anna, Takuro, Mika, and Takeshi... were all killed by monsters. They are no longer in this world. They were replaced by unidentified lifeforms that are merely disguised as them.”

“I know that. I know, but...”

He recalled how hard he and Anna had worked for three days to try and save everyone trapped inside the Jailhouse. The truth was that she’d been dead—a monster—the whole time, and Shun just hadn’t been able to tell. Most likely, she didn’t realize it, either. But if the monster continued to live a normal life as Anna—with her memories and all—then was it really such a bad thing?

“Sorry. Could you let me think about this for a bit?”

Utterly conflicted, that was the only answer Shun could give.

“Very well. Then I will entrust you with this tablet. I shall follow your lead on the matter. Once you have made up your mind, please reset it.”

“Yeah... sure,” Shun replied hesitantly.

He took the tablet from Hiroshi, but despite what he’d said, Shun had already made up his mind.

I can’t possibly destroy the game I made with my own hands.

Anna was dead, but a part of her—her memories—was still alive. It was like she was still there, and Shun couldn’t bring himself to ruin that.

The sound of footsteps crunching through the snow came from somewhere nearby.

Shun looked at Hiroshi, then around at their surroundings. There was no sign of anyone else there. But that was perfectly expected. The

only people weird enough to come out here were Shun and Hiroshi.

"I thought someone was there, but... it looks like it was just my imagination."

Returning to school after so long must have frayed Shun's nerves. Perhaps he was just tired. Hiroshi, however, thought otherwise.

"It wasn't your imagination. Look at that."

Hiroshi was pointing to a third set of footprints. They trailed after Shun and Hiroshi's, making it look like they'd been followed. They seemed to stop abruptly, however. Right before the edge of the swamp, strangely enough. There was no sign that the third party had turned around. It was as if they'd dived right into the water. But the swamp was still frozen over. The ice didn't seem to be broken, and it wasn't thick enough to walk on. What was going on?

A strong north wind blew, rattling the tree branches ominously. Goosebumps ran up and down Shun's arms, but not because he was cold.

2

Shun and Hiroshi left their spot, walking along the relatively untraveled path in silence. Neither of them spoke a word. Shun's mind was on Anna the whole time.

Had the monster with Anna's memories realized its true self? Shun tried to imagine what it would be like if it were him. What if he had been killed and only a copy of his memories remained in some monster? Once he learned he was really that blue monster, he doubted he would be able to remain sane. Anna was likely the same way. In that case, wasn't erasing everything for the best? But... His thoughts ran in circles.

"What's that?"

Hiroshi's voice snapped him back to reality. He could see the lights of a police car up ahead. It was stopped at the entrance to a cemetery. A terrible knot formed in Shun's stomach. Hiroshi must have felt the same.

"Did something happen?" he said as he took off.

Shun quickly followed. Before they could get there, however, the police car departed. Left behind by the roadside was an old man with a white beard, bowing in the direction of the vanishing police car.

"Um, excuse me." Short of breath, Hiroshi called out to the old man. "What happened here?"

"The most accursed thing possible," the old man said, moving his thick eyebrows exaggeratedly. "Someone vandalized the graves. The tombstones are messed up, and all the food offerings were stolen."

What a sad state this is!"

"Could we see?"

"Well, I guess it wouldn't hurt..."

Hiroshi was already proceeding into the grounds before the old man could finish answering. Shun followed, bowing his head. Avoiding the puddles of melted snow, they made their way into the cemetery.

Just as the old man had said, the graves were in a terrible disarray. Half of the gravestones were broken and scattered about every which way. It was impossible to tell what the grave robber was after. There was even a section of upturned earth. Shun stood there in shock at the sight. Hiroshi leaned in closer.

"Shun. Look over there."

Hiroshi glanced and gave a nod to the left. Slowly, Shun turned to look. In the east corner of the graveyard stood a girl. Her hands clasped before a gravestone, Anna was praying.

3

"Anna..." Shun's voice cracked.

It was so cold out, yet there was sweat forming in the palms of his hands.

"Oh, Shun." Anna turned to them. "And Hiroshi, too. What are you two doing together?"

She was wearing a wide-brimmed hat that made it difficult to see half of her face.

"Wh-What are you doing in a graveyard, Anna?" Shun asked, his voice shaky.

Grief and fear created a complicated emotional cocktail inside him. He had no idea how to approach this.

"What else would I be doing? I'm visiting a grave. Today's the anniversary of my parents' deaths."

It had been two months since Anna lost her parents in a car accident. It was true there was nothing strange about her being at the cemetery today. There were even flowers and incense on the grave she was standing before.

"I was a bit surprised at the state of the place, though. My parents' gravestone was knocked over, too. It was hard work righting it. Now I'm all muddy. See?"

Anna showed them her palms and smiled. Her cute dimples were showing.

Shun couldn't say a word. In this moment, there was nothing unnatural about what she was saying or doing. There was nothing

unnatural about Anna. It was really her.

Was I mistaken the other morning?

That was starting to seem more and more plausible.

“School...” Shun finally managed to eke out.

“Huh?” Anna cocked her head slightly.

“Why... weren’t you at school?”

“I mean, you know what happened. I just... can’t go to school right now,” she said, looking down.



"You really weren't at school yesterday?" Hiroshi, who had been silently studying her until now, asked coolly.

"No, I wasn't. Why would you ask that?"

"Apparently they found your name tag in the animal hutch."

"My name tag? That can't be. When I came home from school three days ago, I'm sure it was on my uniform. I haven't worn it since."

She didn't appear to be lying.

I knew it. I was overthinking things. Anna isn't a monster.

It must have been a coincidence that her pupils had appeared wide and empty. That's what Shun decided to believe.

"I have to get going. If I'm late, my uncle will start to worry," Anna said and picked up the ladle and pail by her feet.

Slowly, she approached the two boys. Shun unconsciously took a step back.

Idiot. Why am I losing faith now?

As he cursed himself, Anna drew nearer and nearer. He tried to look into her eyes, but the brim of her hat was in the way. The moment she passed by, Anna suddenly stopped.

"...Hey, did you notice?" she said, her luscious lips moving as she stared straight ahead.

"Huh? What're you talking about?"

Shun's heart was beating like crazy.

"The toppled grave right there... It's Naoki's," she said, pointing at Hiroshi's feet.

"You're right. I had no idea."

Hiroshi checked the name engraved on the side of the overturned gravestone and arched an eyebrow.

"You didn't know, did you? I bet no one in our class does. Isn't that terrible? They made a big fuss when he was hit by the truck, but then went back to pretending like they never knew him. I bet they've all forgotten about him completely," Anna said, grinding her foot into the remaining snow on the ground over and over. "Not that I'm any better. I only thought of him because I stumbled upon that grave. No... I'm the worst of all. I knew. I was the only one who knew Naoki was being bullied by Takuro, yet I couldn't do anything. So... maybe I'm being punished?"

Her voice trembled ever so slightly as that last word left her lips. Anna wiped at her eyes.

"See you."

And with that, she turned away. Shun could have easily grabbed her by the shoulder and forcibly checked the size of her pupils. But he was rooted to the spot. He could only watch her lonely figure walk off.

“She’s not a monster...” Shun whispered once Anna was completely out of sight. “That was Anna.”

Staring at Naoki’s gravestone, Hiroshi said nothing.

“I’m right, aren’t I? We just had a normal conversation with her. Do you think the monster could handle that?”

“The monster with Takeshi’s memories risked its life to save mine. Takuro and Mika also acted quite human even after realizing they were monsters. Rather, they aren’t ‘acting’ like humans. I believe their hearts *are* human.”

“You’re wrong. Anna is Anna. She’s not a monster,” Shun said, his voice getting louder.

“I understand that you wish to believe that, but...”

“Can you prove she’s a monster?”

“If we check her pupils—”

“That’s not proof at all. There are medicines and things that can dilate your eyes. Or maybe it’s some kind of illness.”

“Anna said earlier that she righted her parents’ gravestone on her own. Would you mind trying to do the same with Naoki’s?”

“What’s that supposed to prove?”

Shun pushed Hiroshi aside and grabbed the stone with both hands. Even straining his legs and back to lift it, however, it wouldn’t budge.

“The weight varies with the type of stone, of course, but a tombstone is far too heavy for a normal person to lift on their own.”

“But...”

Shun opened his mouth to try and argue, but nothing more would come out. He turned around to look in the direction Anna had disappeared.

“Maybe I’m being punished?”

Her last words resurfaced in his mind.

“It can’t be...”

His whole body felt limp. Shun collapsed to his knees and struck the ground with a balled fist. He knew it wouldn’t change anything, of course. But he couldn’t help himself.

Chapter 4

MICHIBIKI

—GUIDANCE—



That night, Shun had a dream. He dreamed that Anna was ravaging the graveyard.

"Hungry... So hungry..."

She was muttering to herself over and over, digging in the ground with her bare hands. The frenzied act tore her fingernails off and sent blood splattering everywhere, but she showed no signs of slowing down.

"I can't take it anymore... I want to eat humans."

In Japan, it was a rarity for uncremated bodies to be buried in cemeteries. Anna should have known that, but she'd either lost her mind or the monster's consciousness was driving her to act this way.

"Why can't I find any?!"

Finally growing impatient at her fruitless search, she began toppling gravestones with inhuman strength.

"Where are the humans?"

Her body began to grow as a thick, violet liquid started seeping from her pores.

"I want to eat... humans."

Her voice grew deep and gravely. She scratched at her throat like it hurt. Her eyeballs swelled and looked like they were about to fall right out of her now twisted face. Sharp fangs jutted through her cheeks, her mouth suddenly splitting from ear to ear.

A bestial howl echoed in the night.

And then, finally, Shun woke up. Wiping the dripping sweat from his brow, he got out of bed. He was parched. He left his room and headed for the kitchen. Taking a refreshing swig of mineral water from a bottle in the fridge, he began to calm down.

"Man... What a crazy dream," he muttered as he returned to his room.

But when he got there, Anna was standing by his window. Illuminated by the moonlight shining in through the gap in the curtains, she stared at Shun.

"...Anna?" he squeaked. *"What are you doing here?"*

In one hand she held the tablet Hiroshi had given him earlier that day, and in the other an old CD-ROM. The title of Shun's game was scribbled across the front of it.

"Anna, that's..."

By the time Shun moved to try and retrieve the tablet, she had already slipped his grasp and fled the room. He shuddered at her monstrous speed.

“I’ll be waiting at the Jailhouse,” she said, looking over her shoulder as she went.

The next moment, she was gone.

And then... Shun awoke.

“What in the world?”

He took a deep breath. What was real, and what was a dream? It was all hazy.

He looked around. Nothing seemed out of order. The alarm clock on his desk read nearly 9:00 PM. He must have fallen asleep while trying to finish his homework. He pinched his cheek and felt the telltale pain. It seemed, at least, that he was awake for now.

How happy would he be if everything so far had all been just a dream? He had to wonder for a second. It was true that the terrible things he’d been through all felt like a nightmare. How wonderful would it be to go to school tomorrow and see Takuro and Takeshi?

It was strange. There was a time where he’d wished Takuro would just disappear. But after experiencing death for himself, Shun knew better. No one deserved a fate like that.

All of a sudden a cold breeze invaded the room, fluttering the curtains. The window appeared to be slightly ajar... But how? Shun cocked his head quizzically. That was weird. He was sure he’d closed it before starting his homework.

It can’t be...

His eyes shot to the bookcase by the bed. The tablet he’d left there was gone. He recalled Anna fleeing in his dream. She’d had both the tablet and the CD-ROM with his game on it. He opened his desk drawer and rooted around inside only to find that his bad feeling wasn’t just a feeling. The one and only backup of the game he’d made was gone without a trace.

2

I’m so stupid.

Shun couldn’t help feeling ashamed. He’d never expected the tablet to be stolen, especially not along with his one hard copy of the game.

He wasn’t sure whether what he’d seen in his dream was real or not, but he was fairly certain it had to have been Anna who made off with the tablet. The Jailhouse monster had achieved a dramatic evolution thanks to the tablet. Naturally, it would want to keep it nearby. It was too late to regret not foreseeing this and leaving it out on the bookshelf so carelessly, but he regret it he did.

No, there was no use in beating himself up over it. He had to act

quickly. Shun called Hiroshi, who didn't blame him for what had happened. Instead, he offered some comfort.

"That must mean our enemy is more desperate than we'd imagined. Honestly, I did not entirely believe that resetting the tablet would eliminate the monster, but now I'm confident. The monster must have taken the tablet because it was afraid of that outcome. Let us go and retrieve it posthaste."

"But how? If we go to Anna's place and ask for the tablet back, she'll just feign ignorance."

"We should go to the Jailhouse."

"...Huh?"

"Anna said she would be waiting for you there, no?"

"But that was only a dream..."

"Was it really? Just as you saw in your 'dream,' both the tablet and CD-ROM are missing. In that case, it seems to me what you experienced was quite real."

Perhaps Hiroshi was right. Most likely, Shun was just still having trouble accepting that Anna had been eaten by the monster. The Anna he knew would never break into someone's house to steal something. That's why he'd been trying so hard to convince himself it was a dream.

"...All right. I'll head there now."

But circumstances being what they were, Shun had no choice but to face facts. He nodded with determination even though Hiroshi couldn't see him from the other side of the line.

Once he got off the phone, he returned to his room. He rolled up his comforter and tucked it in to make it look like he was asleep in bed, put on a thick parka, and climbed out of the window. It had only been three days since the incident at the Jailhouse with the police. He didn't want to worry his parents even more.

The night air was quite chilly. Pulling up his hood, Shun ran down the dark street. It wasn't that late at night, but he didn't pass a soul on the way there. Was everyone wary because of the recent nasty news? When he made it to the Jailhouse, Hiroshi was already there. He lifted his right hand in a greeting as soon as he spotted Shun approaching.

After the incident that night, the police had cordoned off the front gate with bright yellow tape. Mysteriously, that tape was all ripped up now. The bronze lock had been torn off the gate, and the gate itself was twisted like it had been crushed.

"It would seem I was right."

Hiroshi jumped the deformed gate without hesitation and entered the Jailhouse grounds. Shun quickly followed suit. He looked up at the building illuminated by the moonlight and got none of the ominous or foreboding feelings he had from it before.

The two boys proceeded straight through the overgrown yard, their exhaled breath white in the wintry night air. They arrived at the front door to find it hanging off its hinges. It looked like the police had broken it down to get in. At least now they wouldn't have to worry about getting locked inside.

Hiroshi turned to Shun, who nodded silently in return. Their thoughts were communicated wordlessly. And with that, they set foot inside the building.

The interior lights were all out. The moonlight barely reached past the front door, so they could hardly see a thing just a few feet inside. Hiroshi took out a flashlight and turned it on. The police must have turned the place upside down. The red carpet covering the stairs was flipped over and pushed to the side. There was no furniture anymore, either. It had probably all been collected and taken away.

The mansion was dark, unlike before, yet there wasn't a trace of its usual creepy atmosphere. The two boys stepped into the entrance hall without bothering to take off their shoes. Hiroshi shined the flashlight further in, revealing a great hole in the opposite wall. They immediately went over to check it out, but on the other side was only an expansive, desolate-looking room decorated in a Western style. There was no suggestion of the underground path to the annex.

Ka-tunk.

Suddenly, there was a noise overhead like the sound of something falling over.

"Let us investigate."

Hiroshi quickly turned on his heels and sprinted up the stairs. Shun followed right after him. They checked the second floor first, but there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary there. Next, they headed up to the third floor. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, they immediately identified where the noise had come from. A single door facing the northern hall was open, and white light spilled forth from it. It was the study.

Hiroshi switched off his flashlight, and darkness rushed in to surround the two boys. Careful not to make a single sound, they slowly proceeded toward the study.

"I've got it all."

From inside the room, they heard Anna's voice. Shun caught his breath as they stopped to listen.

"Will this really do what you said it will?"

It seemed she wasn't alone. Someone else had to be there. His back pressed up against the wall, Hiroshi peered inside the room. Shun crouched down at his feet and did the same through the gap in the door. The white light was coming from the glowing tablet in the center of the room. The more their eyes adjusted, the more they began

to see and understand.

Before them was a sight they were both familiar with—an antique-looking bookshelf against the wall with a short desk situated in front of it. Anna was seated there with her back turned to them. Her eyes were locked on the tablet on the desk. She wasn't moving a muscle.

"What are you planning to do?" her bell-like voiced asked an empty room.

Who was she talking to? Hiroshi and Shun looked around, but neither of them could see anything. Then, without warning, the tablet floated up into the air. Shun heard a gasp from above his head. He looked up to see Hiroshi terribly shocked, his usually stoic expression devastated.

The tablet stopped about a meter off the ground. No one was touching it, but the images on the screen continued to change. It was like it was under an invisible user's control.

"You're quite cold. Are you still angry?" Anna asked, her shoulders trembling slightly. "...Of course, huh? I guess so. I did practically kill you, after all."

Oh, that's what this is.

Shun finally realized what was going on.

"I was at a loss as to how to handle the situation while you were suffering, and ended up ignoring it completely," said Anna to apparently no one.

But there was no doubt in Shun's mind. It had to be Naoki in there with her. Anna could see ghosts and communicate with the spirits of the dead. The monster who'd consumed her must have inherited that ability, as well.

"Am I... dreaming or something?" Hiroshi whispered.

Shun thought to explain, but even if he did, there was no way a realist like Hiroshi would accept it.

"Huh? Shun and Hiroshi?"

Hearing Anna suddenly say their names, Shun's entire body tensed... just enough to make the floor creak slightly underneath him.

Shoot!

Anna's back might have been to the door, but there was no telling where Naoki was standing. He must've had a clear view of them. Anna turned around. Hiroshi, deciding it was pointless to try hiding, opened the door and shone the flashlight in her face. Shun gasped. Her pupils were wide like a corpse's.

“What are you doing here?” Hiroshi inquired. “You were talking to someone. Where are they?”

“I doubt you would believe me if I told you,” Anna replied with a chilly smile.

This emotionless manner of speaking was unlike her. She must have been upset. It was only natural. There was no way anyone could remain calm after learning they weren’t themselves.

“There’s no point in trying to explain. You two would never understand. Could you just leave me alone?”

“I understand,” spoke up Shun.

He couldn’t just ignore Anna when she was suffering like this.

“Naoki’s here, isn’t he?” he asked.

This wasn’t Anna. It was the monster that had eaten her. He knew that all too well. He was ready to kill her in order to prevent more victims, if necessary. But that determination wavered when she was right in front of him. He wanted to save Anna somehow. Perhaps there was a way. He couldn’t help himself from hoping.

“I see. You knew about my annoying ability, Shun?” she said, her expression softening some.

“Yeah. So, tell us. What are you doing here—”

“But that still doesn’t mean you understand how I feel.” She cut him off, her voice becoming angry.

“...”

Stunned by the grim look he’d never seen on her face before, Shun couldn’t eke out another word.

“Do you have any idea what it feels like to not be yourself? I’m definitely here, but I know this isn’t me... Now I finally understand. This is how all the spirits I’ve met must have felt.”

A faded black, palm-sized box floated up from the desk. It was a disk drive that looked suspiciously like the one Shun loved so dearly. She must have made off with it when she took the tablet. The cord extending from it wriggled in the air like a snake and connected to the tablet. Shun and Hiroshi couldn’t see him, but it had to be Naoki controlling it. What was he planning?

“Naoki was kind enough to listen to my concerns. It made me happy. If it weren’t for him, I might have killed myself long ago... Oh, wait. I’m already dead, aren’t I? In any case, the only reason I’m still sane is thanks to him.”

Next, the CD-ROM floated up into the air. On it was the alpha version of the escape game Shun had first made two years ago. It slipped into the disk drive with ease.

“I’m very grateful to Naoki. And yet, not even he truly understands me... No, I’m not blaming you, Naoki. It’s perfectly understandable.” Anna’s gaze shifted to nothingness, like Naoki had

spoken up in the middle of her talking. "The dead don't have to deal with other people. I do. This monster still lives with my memories in it. It has to eat in order to live, right? And that means it needs to come into contact with humans."

Anna was talking like she was possessed. No, that wasn't quite right. Technically, Anna was possessing the monster.

"I don't want to be alone. I want friends..."

Her gaze shifted back to Shun and Hiroshi. There was a pain in her voice.

"I should have plenty of friends in the annex, but for some reason, the underground path is gone, and I can't get to them," Anna continued, her empty eyes swimming left to right. "Naoki told me that Takuro and the others met the same fate I did. They're in the annex right now. They could have escaped with you, Hiroshi, but chose to stay instead."

"I'm surprised you know that," Hiroshi replied.

He'd been quiet all this time, but now pushed up his glasses frames as he shot a sharp glare at Anna.

"I understand all too well how they felt. Painfully so. If I had known it would be such suffering to live in the outside world, I would have..."

"Anna, is Naoki next to you?" Hiroshi asked.

"I doubt you'd believe me, but yes."

"Perhaps I wouldn't have before, but I've witnessed a great number of impossible things with my own two eyes recently. The spirits of the departed may not be explainable by science just yet, but I am sure they exist," he said, slowly turning his gaze from Anna to the tablet floating in the air. "Naoki, how do you know what transpired between me and Takuro in the annex?"

The tablet moved slightly further into the room, as if Naoki had turned around in disgust.

Grrt... Grrt...

His apparent movements were accompanied by the sound of something being dragged.

"That sound... I recall hearing it in the annex, as well. Ah, so that's what happened. I finally understand. It was you walking around in the annex. No wonder you knew what happened there." Hiroshi's gaze grew sharper. "Why is it, then, that you didn't tell Anna the truth?"

"The... truth?" Anna asked, unease stirring on her face.

"There was a great explosion in the annex. It was all I could do to manage to escape. The blast must have been what cut off the path from the mansion to the annex."

The color fled Anna's face.

“So, he really didn’t tell you...” In stark contrast, Hiroshi spoke calmly without moving even an eyebrow. “The explosion was greater than you can imagine. I believe the entire building was destroyed. Naturally, I doubt Takuro and the others survived.”

“That’s a lie!” Anna shouted. “You don’t know anything, Hiroshi. Naoki says not to trust you. I think he’s right. Even if you’re right about this explosion, how can you be sure they’re really dead? You didn’t see their bodies, did you? They might have survived just like you did.”

“I cannot deny that possibility. However, even if they are alive—”

Suddenly, Hiroshi doubled over. Then he went flying into the wall.

“Stop it, Naoki!” Anna screamed.

The floating tablet’s screen repeatedly flashed red. It was a message saying that the game had been installed. Not a moment later, the very space around them began to twist and bend. Shun thought he was hallucinating, but that wasn’t it.

“The game begins.”

That voice he’d heard so many times before echoed against his eardrums. Without a doubt, it was Naoki’s.

The walls rippled, and the floor slowly rose. A rift appeared in empty space and bright light flooded out of it. The golden light swallowed everything. A fierce roaring echoed in Shun’s skull. The light enveloped him, and that was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter 5

NAGEKI

— GRIEF —



Shun stood underneath the cypress tree. A northward wind blew, rattling the branches. Similarly, Shun's heart was also quite rattled. He was behind the school. Before him were two of his classmates, their backs flat against the wall of the school building.

The girl stared at him, her round eyes growing even wider. Shun recalled that her name was Satsuki. And the boy standing before her—his arms outspread like was shielding her—was Kazuya. It seemed to be all they could manage just to stay upright on their quivering legs.

"What's going on?" Shun asked.

Why were they so scared? The moment he moved his right foot to take a step toward them, Satsuki let out an involuntary gasp.

"Please... no..." Kazuya begged. Tears and snot were streaming down his face. "Don't kill us... please..."

He was begging just like Shun used to in vain attempts to get Takuro to stop bullying him.

"I'll do anything you want... so just stop... Please, Shun..." Kazuya whimpered.

Shun couldn't help laughing.

"What are you talking about? I haven't done anything."

"Then... what's that you're holding in your hand?"

"Huh?"

Shun looked down. He was clutching a large, messy clump of hair. From it hung human heads.

"Wh-Whoa!"

He panicked and released his grip, but the hair was so tangled around his fingers that it made no difference. He frantically shook his arm, tearing the skin from the scalps of both severed heads and sending them crashing into the roots of the cypress tree. They rolled along the ground from there, one finally coming to rest face-first toward Shun. It was Hiroshi's head. His eyes were wide open and falling out of their sockets.

Shun opened his mouth to scream, but no sound escaped his throat. He could hardly breathe. His heart was beating erratically.

"Hiroshi...? But why...?"

That was all he could eke out.

"Isn't it obvious? You killed him, didn't you?!" Kazuya said, his tone hardening.

"Me? What're you—"

Shun tried to laugh again but couldn't. For at that moment, the other head bumped into his foot. His own face was looking up at him

with empty eyes.

Me? Then... who am I?

"You are me."

The answer came in a deep voice from within himself. It felt like it was echoing from the very core of his brain.

His muscles throbbed with every beat of his heart. Blue fluid started to seep from his pores. His upper arms began expanding rapidly as they bubbled and popped like boiling water. They doubled and then tripled in size in no time at all. His face was hot. It was like he was on fire. He reflexively put a hand to his face and felt an unfamiliar mass of muscle.

Help!

He tried to scream, but all that came out of his mouth was a monkey-like screech. His arms were horribly twisted—inhumanly so. But it wasn't just his arms. His legs too were absurdly large, almost like he was wearing a muscle suit.

Unable to withstand the sudden increase in his size, Shun's clothes split apart. He watched as his point of view shot upward, and he could feel the cold of the snow clumped on the tree branches around his head. The birds resting their wings nearby took flight in shock.

Shun was now taller than the cypress tree, but he continued to grow. He saw his reflection in the school windows. His giant face was monstrously disfigured. His enormous, bulging eyeballs took up almost half of it. His left eye was so enlarged that it looked like it would fall out of his head at any moment.

His repulsiveness made his breath catch. The monster reflected in the windows moved just as he did. Fearfully, he touched his cheek. The monster did the same.

He wailed a throat-splitting cry, but the only sound it made was a low, echoing growl.

And then he woke up.

Shun was lying face-down on the ground. Propping up his torso, he looked around. There was a set of stairs carpeted in bright red. From the ceiling hung a glittering, extravagant chandelier. A long hallway extended to his left and right, lined with windows that were nailed shut. This had to be the Jailhouse entrance hall.

"Hn... ngh..."

Shun heard a familiar voice near his feet. He looked to see Hiroshi collapsed nearby, his face strained.

"You okay, Hiroshi?"

He quickly jumped up and ran to his friend's side. To see him so clearly in pain worried Shun all the more, considering how expressionless Hiroshi normally was. Shun gently shook his shoulders until he came to.

“Where are we?” Hiroshi asked, looking up at Shun with glassy eyes.

“The entrance hall. We were both here when I woke up. What’s going on? I remember we were talking to Anna in the study on the third floor...”

“The area seems to have changed slightly from earlier.”

Pushing up his glasses which had slid down his nose, Hiroshi slowly stood up.

“Huh?”

Shun followed Hiroshi’s gaze. He was right, of course. The mansion once more radiated the same sinister, creepy aura it had on their previous visits. The chandelier was brightly lit, and the hall was neatly decorated with expensive-looking furnishings. The wallpaper at the back of the entrance hall was ripped in one place, revealing a small door. The police tape that had been everywhere was now nowhere to be seen.

“What’s going on here?”

Something cold ran down Shun’s spine. Warning lights were flashing in his head.

“This place is dangerous. Let’s go outside.”

“Unfortunately, I believe it’s a little too late for that,” Hiroshi replied immediately.

The busted front door was somehow back in its original state. Hiroshi turned the knob, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Not only are there metal panels on the windows, they’re also nailed shut. It would seem we’re trapped in here again.”

Shun recalled Naoki’s words from before he blacked out.

“The game begins.”

“It can’t be... can it?”

He sank weakly to the ground.

2

Hiroshi left the entrance hall and began walking the halls without a word. He stopped at the closest door and tried the knob.

“It won’t open. It must be locked,” he said before moving on to the next. “Same here. How strange. Earlier, they all opened normally.”

Shun’s thoughts began to wander.

Could it be...?

The game installed on the tablet had most likely stopped working in Hiroshi’s dramatic escape from the Jailhouse. That’s why the mansion no longer had the same sinister aura it used to. Or, at least, it hadn’t until Naoki installed the alpha version of the game onto it. If,

as a result of that, the Jailhouse and the game were linked once more, then...

Shun passed by Hiroshi, who was still going down the line checking doors, and headed straight for the end of the hall. He tried the brass knob, and just as he'd thought, the door opened easily.

"I see," observed Hiroshi. "It would seem everything is as it was before, then. Inside the unlocked room should be the dining hall, where we will find a useful piece of broken plate that fell from the shelf—"

He stopped midsentence when he peered over Shun's shoulder.

"...Oh, what is this?" he asked, his eyebrow arched.

What lay beyond the door wasn't the dining room. There was no long, Western-style table, no cabinet of expensive-looking china, and no door to the kitchen. There was only a two-person sofa, a modest table, and a mid-sized LCD TV.

"This place sure has changed. Previously, the Jailhouse was furnished with a sense of European refinement, but this... This is more like a plainly decorated motel," Hiroshi said, disappointed.

"I knew it..." Shun muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"The room layout and available items were completely different in the first version of the game I created versus the one I officially released online later. It's got the same gameplay premise, but the map and everything else is basically new now."

Apparently installing the alpha version on the tablet was enough to transform the entire mansion accordingly.

"In that case, won't escaping be a simple affair? I assume you remember the contents of the game, despite how long ago you first created it."

"Yeah, that won't be an issue."

"Then let us escape before we run into the blue monster. I should like to retrieve the tablet before we go, but considering the circumstances, safety and escape need to be our top priorities."

Shun nodded. Hiroshi was right. If they ran into the monster, they'd have no chance of beating it. Powerless humans, by design, had no choice but to run from it. Hiroshi had had far more encounters with the monsters of the mansion than anyone at this point, so he knew that best of all.

"What should we do first?" he asked.

"Follow me. We need to grab the study key from the bathroom," Shun responded.

He quickly left the room, heading straight down the hall. Passing by the front door, he headed into the opposite wing of the mansion. He stopped at a particular door and opened it.

“H-Huh?”

Shun couldn't believe his eyes. It wasn't a bathroom, but a toilet... right where it should have been in the newest version of the game.

“How...”

There was supposed to be a tub full of blue water that would drain to reveal a key when the plug was pulled. At least, that's how he'd programmed it. But now the all-important bathroom was missing.

“It would seem the normal route is unusable,” Hiroshi said from beside Shun.

“Just what is going on here...?” Shun asked in awe.

“Perhaps because the alpha version was installed overtop of the latest version without uninstalling it first, somehow the data from both versions became mixed?”

“No way...”

Shun held his head. This was the worst possible development. Now they didn't know how to escape. Maybe there wasn't even a way to escape at all.

“It's quite all right.”

Hiroshi reassuringly pat Shun on the shoulder. Shun looked up at him, but when he did, Hiroshi burst into laughter.

“Just look at your face!”

It really must have been something to make Hiroshi of all people laugh like that. How pathetic. Shun quickly rubbed his face.

“You once called me a genius for clearing your game so quickly. Now, let me say this: Shun, you're also a genius for creating such a fascinating game.” Hiroshi continued with a smile plastered on his face, “Which means that we have two geniuses here. Does a game exist that we cannot possibly clear? Have confidence and let us challenge this one together.”

Hiroshi's words and smile gave Shun the strength he needed to summon his courage just as his spirit was about to break. Hiroshi was right. Freshly resolved, Shun balled his hand into a fist.

Surely the two of us together can escape even this mess.

3

The first step to clearing the game would be to understand the layout of the mansion. Shun and Hiroshi decided to investigate each room one by one, starting with the first floor. The mansion stretched from east to west, with separate halls on the north and south sides. There was no change in the basic shape or scale of the building, it seemed.

Most of the rooms were locked, preventing them from entering. In

the end, the only ones they could access on the first floor were the room with the TV, the toilet, and the dining room that had been moved to the north hall in this version of the Jailhouse. They investigated each of them, searching from top to bottom. They left no stone unturned, but they didn't have anything to show for it when it was all said and done.

The hidden door in the entrance hall had no knob, meaning they couldn't do anything with it for now. If that element remained from the newest version of the game, they'd be able to open it by retrieving the doorknob from the attic. But there was no telling what lay beyond it after that. There was no annex in the alpha version of the game, after all.

After thoroughly investigating the first floor, the boys ascended the stairs toward the next level.

"Hey, Hiroshi," Shun called to his friend climbing the steps in front of him. "Why is Naoki doing this?"

"Naoki? You mean our former classmate, Oobashi Naoki? He died last year," Hiroshi replied calmly.

It seemed he still didn't entirely believe that Naoki was involved in all of this from beyond the grave.

"Anna told me something once. She said that Naoki has the power to control people's dreams. That's how he lured Takuro and Takeshi to the Jailhouse."

"That's a more credible theory than ghosts. It has been scientifically proven that outside stimuli can affect one's dreams."

There, they reached the second floor. The two boys began checking doors anew as they continued talking about Naoki.

"Naoki was bullied by Takuro, right? I heard it was actually Takuro's fault he was hit by that truck... That must be why he brought them here—to enact his vengeance."

Most of the doors were locked, just like on the first floor. And expectedly, the rooms that were open didn't yield any clues.

"You said Takuro and the others were killed by the monsters, meaning Naoki got his revenge, right? So why is this still continuing?"

"I am not conceding the existence of ghosts, but if everything is as you say and all of this has been the machinations of a vengeful Naoki, then I expect I'm on his list of targets, as well."

"No... That can't be," Shun quickly argued. "You didn't bully him, right? There's no reason for him to hate you."

"I'm not good at reading the inner workings of others' hearts. I cannot deny the possibility that I may have hurt him without realizing it."

"No, that just can't be."

Shun couldn't believe it. Naoki was just like him. They'd both

been bullied by Takuro, living through hell. The only reason Shun had managed to hang in there was because he had Hiroshi.

"After we parted ways at the cemetery today, I returned home and investigated that email you spoke of," Hiroshi said, suddenly stopping in the hall.

"You mean the one sent to all of our classmates?"

"Yes. I tried various methods to see if I could extract the sender's information from the mail header and managed to discover the email host. And from what I remember of the emails shared during the cultural festival, there was only one person in our class who used this particular host."

"Who was it?"

"Naoki."

Shun was struck dumb upon hearing what Hiroshi was suggesting.

"Of course, I doubt Naoki himself sent the email. It must have been his mother or someone similar."

"Why would they do that?"

"The email said, 'Know the graveness of the sin you have committed and regret it.' I was unable to recognize the pain Naoki was in. Surely that is a sin unto itself."

"No..."

"I believe his thirst for vengeance will not be slaked merely by the deaths of Takuro and his gang. What if his hate grew to extend to his classmates who didn't lift a finger to help him?"

Despite prefacing all this by saying that he believed Naoki's mother to be the culprit, it certainly sounded like Hiroshi really thought Naoki was the sender. He was probably struggling with his own thoughts, trying to reconcile the existence of a ghost in the equation.

"What if his hate grew to extend to his classmates who didn't lift a finger to help him?"

Hiroshi's words echoed in Shun's head. It was there that he fell silent, unable to argue.

"What is the matter? Was my conjecture too off-the-wall?"

Just the opposite...

Shun, having been through what Naoki had, found himself flabbergasted at just how relatable what Hiroshi was saying sounded.

"I was like that, too..." Shun whispered in response. "Sometimes I got mad at everyone for not realizing how much I was suffering. So... I understand. That's why Naoki..."

"If nothing else, that explains why you didn't receive the email. You weren't part of the class while Naoki was being bullied."

"Then do you think Naoki's planning on doing this to everyone who was?"

“Most likely.”

“We have to stop him. Somehow, we gotta convince him—”

Suddenly, something covered Shun’s mouth. He couldn’t see anything, but there was unmistakably a hand clamped over his lips.

Hiroshi, help!

Shun wanted to scream, but all that came out was muffled sound. The door behind him then suddenly opened. Something yanked on his back, dragging him into the doorway. An invisible power then sent Shun flying. He slammed his back into the wall hard enough that it knocked the wind out of him for a second.

“Shun!”

Hiroshi ran over after him, but just as he reached the room, the door slammed shut as if to forbid him entry.

Click.

The distinct sound of a locking mechanism engaging echoed in the room.

“What happened? Shun! Open up! Shun!” Hiroshi shouted as he banged on the outside of the door.

Standing up, Shun tried to approach the door, but a sofa suddenly slid in front of him to block the way. It was like it had a mind of its own. A blue magic marker on the sofa then floated into the air. It moved over to the wall and then began scrawling.

Welcome to the new Jailhouse.

Shun’s eyes went wide as he watched the marker move on its own.



Don't worry. I'm not out to hurt you. Hee hee hee.

He could swear he actually heard the sound of giggling coming from somewhere.

When your friend is dead, I'll let you go.

"Is that you, Naoki?" he asked the wall.

You know about me? Aw, you're making me blush.

"Just stop this," Shun said, addressing the unseen figure.

Shut up. Don't talk to me.

The writing became much more erratic than before.

You don't know the first thing about me.

"I do, though. I was bullied by Takuro just like you were."

But you weren't killed.

Shun was at a loss for words.

I've met the same fate as you.

Shun wanted to tell him that he'd also been killed at Takuro's hands and had become a ghost, but there was no way Naoki would believe him. No one besides Shun remembered it.

"Naoki, doing this won't save you. It'll just make the pain worse."

Shut up!

A lamp in the corner of the room toppled over and crashed loudly to the floor.

Shut up, shut up, shut up!

The chaotic text smeared the wall blue.

Everyone's gonna die!

With those final words, the marker fell to the floor.

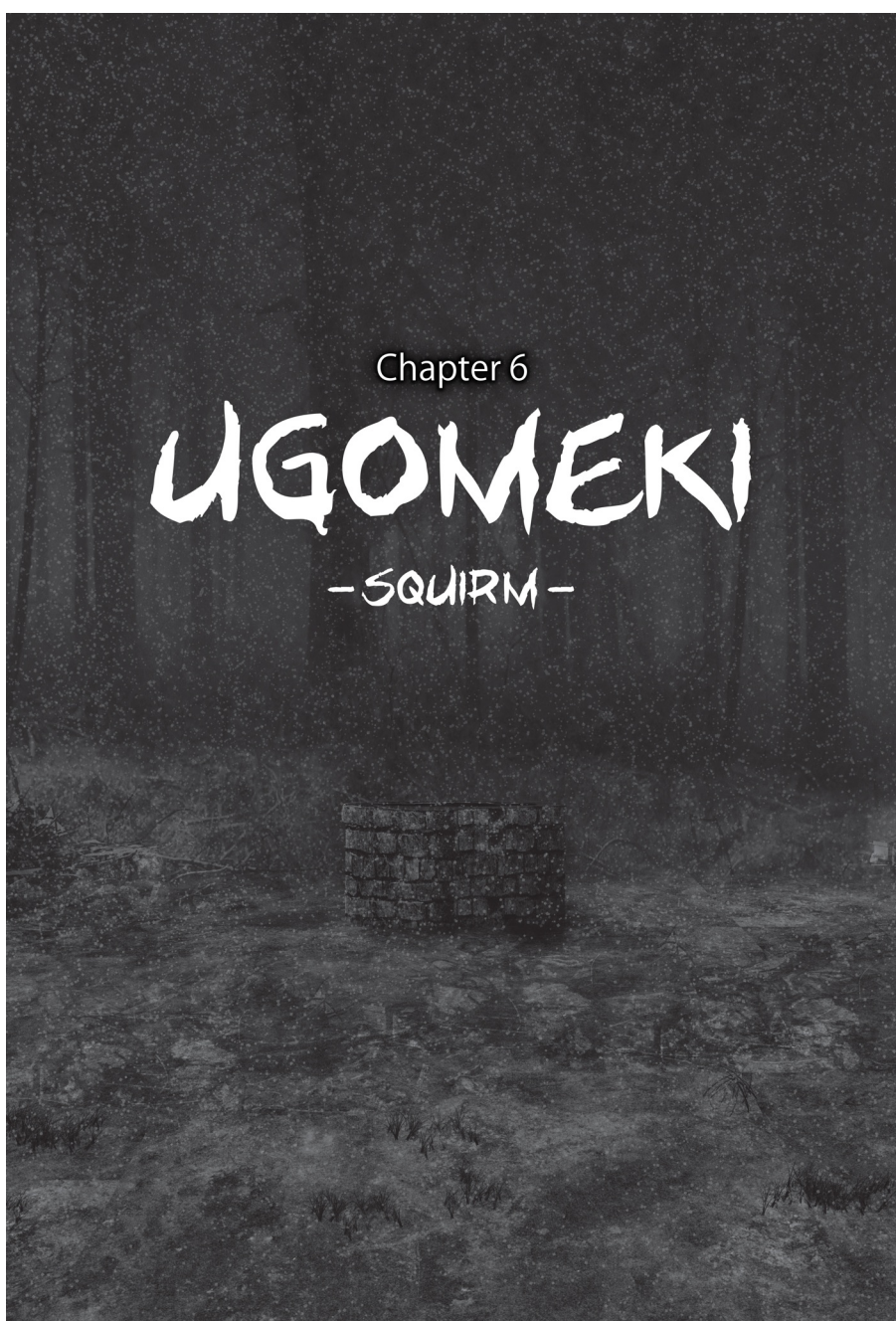
"Naoki?" Shun called out.

But there was no response. The room was totally silent.

Chapter 6

UGOMEKI

—SQUIRM—



Hiroshi approached most things with unshakeable confidence. When he'd first encountered the Jailhouse monster, he wasn't struck by fear or confusion, but rather the rush of being the first person to discover a new species. But now, the thrill was gone.

Pressing a hand to his chest, he could feel his heart racing. His breathing was ragged. Cold sweat was dripping down his back. Hiroshi now finally understood that these were signs of fear. But he had no idea what was happening right in front of him.

Shun had suddenly started moaning in pain when the door behind him opened and he seemed to be sucked inside. Hiroshi had tried to give chase, but the door heartlessly slammed shut before him. The last thing he saw of Shun was the look of abject despair on his face. Try as Hiroshi might to pull on the knob or tackle the door, it wouldn't budge.

He had no other choice. He'd either need to find the key to the room or a tool to help him break down the door. Those were the only ways to save Shun. As for what was happening to Shun, he couldn't even begin to say. If this was Naoki's doing, however, he doubted Shun was in any immediate danger.

Naoki's goal is most likely to kill me.

As such, Shun—who had more knowledge about the game than anyone else in the world—was an obstacle. That must have been why Naoki separated them. Considering the contents of the email, Hiroshi thought it was relatively safe to assume that Shun would be spared from Naoki's vengeance. He may have been forcibly abducted, but that would probably be the worst of it.

His mind racing, Hiroshi desperately tried to suppress his panic. If he lost his cool, he wouldn't be able to make clear-headed decisions. That was especially important now that he was alone.

"Shun, I'll be right back," he said, stepping away from the door.

From there, Hiroshi headed to the third floor and found his way to the study. The door was open, and no one seemed to be hiding inside, though there was a slightly sweet smell lingering in the air. Hiroshi closed his eyes and focused entirely on his olfactory senses. The scent reminded him of silver birches in spring—just like the pleasant smell always wafting from Anna's hair. She must have just left the room.

Hiroshi approached the bookcase and removed a single volume from the densely packed shelves. Inserting his hand into the open space and pushing, the bookcase slowly began sliding to the left. Behind it was a hidden passage. The staircase leading to the attic.

“It appears the setup of this room is the same as in my previous visits,” Hiroshi muttered as he carefully began ascending the stairs.

In the attic should be a door that led outside the mansion. But with more than a ten-meter drop to the ground, jumping from it would be a death sentence. If he could anchor himself with some rope, however, he might be able to safely escape. But first things first, he’d have to make sure the setup of the attic was the same, as well.

Upon reaching the top of the stairway, he tried the door there. It wasn’t locked, and the knob turned easily. Opening it a crack, he peered inside.

A naked lightbulb hung from the ceiling, casting an orange light over the room. It was a small space with only a single bed. And just beyond that was a small door. Nothing appeared to be any different from the last time he was here.

Hiroshi then quickly cut across the room, eyes locked on the small door to the outside world. He gripped the knob, and it too twisted without a hint of resistance. Now if he could just find some rope, escape should be at hand.

His rising hopes were an unfortunate distraction, however. Otherwise, he might have noticed the presence behind him. But his reaction was just a little too delayed.

He finally turned around when he heard a creepy buzzing sound. The entire floor was now blue. A blue that, upon closer inspection, was rustling and scuttling about.

2

A horde of cockroaches carpeted the floor, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. No, they weren’t cockroaches. Their indigo bodies were similar to that of *Eucorydia yasumatsui*, but the rest of their anatomy was quite clearly distinct from that of a normal roach. Each one of them had two long feelers, a shrimp-like tail, and a eerie pattern on their back that resembled a human eye. There were so many that those eyes almost seemed to be staring at him.

Hiroshi’s heart fluttered for a moment at the discovery of a new species of insect never before recorded in any field guide, but the white smoke rising from the floor gave him pause. An acrid smell filled the room.

Not good. That’s hydrochloric acid.

Hiroshi covered his mouth with his right hand. The cockroach-like creatures seemed to be excreting acid. If he didn’t get out soon, the hydrogen chloride gas in the air would cause his respiratory system to fail. He needed to move, and fast.

Hiroshi retrieved the flashlight from his jacket and threw it at the cockroaches. But instead of scattering, they unleashed a torrent of acid from their backs and melted the flashlight in an instant.

“Fascinating...”

Hiroshi knew he was in mortal danger, but he couldn't help his awe in witnessing the great destructive force this new species was capable of. He wanted to collect some samples for further research, but combated back such urges. This wasn't the time for that.

Now, what do I do?

In order to escape the room, Hiroshi would need to make his way through the scuttling mass of cockroaches on the floor. However, his now melted flashlight was proof enough that the shoes he was wearing wouldn't last a second in the acid. And after they went, his flesh would be next. That much was clear.

But even so, he couldn't just stay here and wait to die. The white smoke was growing thicker with every passing second. It was only a matter of time before his respiratory system began failing.

Keeping his calm, he surveyed the whole room. All there really was was the dirty-looking bed nearby. He had no choice; he'd have to escape through the small door where he was. Of course, jumping from this height would be suicide.

But the bed... What if he used the sheet as a rope? He could tear it up and tie the pieces together to form a stretch of fabric about seven or eight meters long. He could tie one end to the bed and use the rest to climb out of the door. It would have to do. He didn't have time to hesitate.

Hiroshi crouched low, set his eyes on his target, and sprung for the bed. It was softer than he'd expected. He almost lost his balance when he landed, but managed to keep from tumbling to the floor. The hundreds of eyes on the cockroaches' backs all shifted to face him. It was disturbing, almost as if they were observing him.

Hiroshi quickly ripped the sheet from the bed and began tearing it lengthwise. Then he started tying the strips together. He had no idea what kind of tensile strength this material had. He assumed it would support his body weight, but it was still fabric. The instant the cockroach acid touched it, he was finished.

Still, he couldn't hesitate. This was his only shot at survival. Even if the odds were against him, this was an all-or-nothing bet he had to take.

Once he was done knotting the sheet together, he secured one end of it tightly to the bed. Now he just had to get the door open and jump. And he couldn't afford to hesitate. If he took too long, the cockroaches would disintegrate his lifeline. Hiroshi stood up on the bed and ran through the plan in his head.

Jump from the bed. Open the door. Throw the sheet out. Leap into the void. It'll be fine.

In just a few seconds, he would be safely on the ground below. That was all he had to get through. Steeling himself, he tensed to jump when the bed lurched to one side.

Shoot!

Hiroshi cursed himself when he realized his blunder. He'd been trying to keep his wits about him, but it hadn't totally worked. While he'd been focused on knotting the sheet together, the cockroaches had crept closer and melted one of the legs of the bed.

Standing on it as it lurched, Hiroshi was thrown totally off balance. If he fell now, he'd plunge right into the sea of cockroaches. He flung out an arm, hoping to grab on to something. But the bed was the only piece of furniture in the room. His fingers vainly grasped at nothing.

Shun... I'm sorry.

Hiroshi said his prayers.

This is as far as I go.

He shut his eyes tight...

Suddenly, the door to the attic burst open, and a figure came flying into the room. It hurdled toward Hiroshi with inhuman speed, quickly grabbed him, and then kicked the toppled bed back toward the exit. It all happened so fast that Hiroshi couldn't parse what had just happened.

The mysterious figure set him down at the top of the stairs.

"That was close, huh?" it said with a smirk that flashed pearly white teeth.

"...Yes."

Hiroshi tried to speak, but that was all that came out. For there, standing before him, was Takuro.

3

Hiroshi had always assumed that he lacked the key emotions others took for granted. He was born dispassionate. He believed that he would never share in someone else's joy or sadness. But the moment he saw Takuro's smile, something hot welled up in his chest. His eyes burned, and his vision became blurry.

"Takuro... you're okay!"

He pretended to push up his glasses frames to disguise the gesture of wiping away tears. He didn't want anyone to see him behaving so strangely.

"I'm not sure you could call this 'okay,' man," Takuro said

jokingly.



Hiroshi then became aware of the ominous sound of flapping wings behind them. Turning to look, he saw the horde of cockroaches rising into the air.

“Whoa, there.”

Takuro kicked the door with expert skill, slamming it right in the face of the cockroach onslaught. The closed door rattled violently in its frame. Were the cockroaches tackling it? They had a surprising amount of strength for insects.

“They’re basically brainless, so I can’t communicate with them. They’ll melt the door down and come flying out soon enough, though, so let’s get out of here.”

Takuro then turned and leaped down the flight of stairs in a single bound, sticking a perfect landing at the bottom. Hiroshi was completely taken aback. Takuro was moving like an elite Olympic gymnast. He’d always been athletic, certainly, but this demonstration of agility reached new heights.

Hiroshi hurried down the stairs after him and returned the bookshelf to its original position, sealing the passageway.

“Don’t worry. We should be fine here,” Takuro sat down on the desk and said. “Those things mercilessly attack anyone that invades their territory, but as soon as you leave, they turn docile.”

“You’re quite well informed.”

“It’s not me, really. It’s just stuff the monster that ate me already knew,” Takuro snorted in self-derision with a small shrug.

Simply talking to him, Hiroshi thought he seemed just like Takuro. Ignoring the enlarged, empty pupils, that is.

“But in truth... you *are* the monster that ate Takuro, correct?”

Takuro chuckled at his slip of the tongue.

“You always were a straight-shooter. I still have feelings, you know.”

“Oh... I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry about it. You could say I’ve gotten used to my new situation.”

Takuro made it sound like it was no big deal, but it couldn’t be that easy. Despite his smile, there was a permanent crease in his brow.

“What happened to you guys after I escaped the Jailhouse?” Hiroshi asked.

“The roof collapsed, and we were surrounded by a sea of fire. If we were regular humans, we certainly would have died right then and there. But these monsters have unbelievable power. We managed to get out of that room with the altar, and we fled toward the main mansion from there. We’re surprisingly fast when we’re in human form.”

Indeed, he'd just displayed the same superhuman speed while rescuing Hiroshi.

"We made it into the underground path and hid in the electrical room. We must have gotten lucky. There was a huge explosion, but we were safe there... Heh, maybe I shouldn't call it luck. Maybe it would have been easier just to die then."

Takuro's expression clouded for a moment, which Hiroshi didn't fail to notice.

"After the rumbling from the explosion died down, we tried to leave immediately, but the path had collapsed both ways, blocking us off from the mansion and the annex. We were trapped underground. I thought we were surely done for then." He turned to face Hiroshi and asked, "How many days has it been?"

"That was about three days ago."

"That's all? It felt like at least ten."

"What did you do for sustenance?" Hiroshi asked.

"There was some water seeping in from above ground, so we managed."

"And food?"

"Don't worry. I haven't eaten anyone yet," Takuro said jokingly. "Mika had some chocolate in her pocket, so we shared that and made do."

The monsters reproduced everything about the victims they consumed. That had been their saving grace.

"When we ran out, I *really* thought we were done for. But then... suddenly a door to the Jailhouse appeared."

The once closed-off space must have reopened when the alpha version of the game was installed on the tablet, changing the Jailhouse.

"We poked around the mansion and found the kitchen right away. There's a huge fridge just packed with food. We were in the middle of gobbling it down when we heard something from the attic. I came to check it out, thinking someone might be here, and that's when I saw you getting attacked by the cockroaches. And now here we are."

"The kitchen is on the first floor, isn't it? You could hear me from down there?"

"Yeah. I know it sounds crazy when I say it out loud. I wonder... It was a faint sound, but I knew exactly where it was coming from."

Hiroshi mused to himself that that must be another of the monster's unique abilities.

"Is Mika in the kitchen now?" he asked.

"Yeah, she's all excited about making a delicious soup for me."

"She's all right, then?"

Takuro nodded.

“She’s taking this a lot better than I am. She was actually happy, saying it was like a dream that we could spend time like this, just the two of us. We were on death’s door not an hour ago...”

His eyes half shut in a fond smile. Hiroshi had never seen such a gentle expression on Takuro’s face before.

“She... wants to live here. I’m thinking that’s not a bad idea.”

“Why? You should escape with me.”

“No can do.” Takuro shook his head. “It’d be one thing if I could stay in this form forever, but that’s not how it works, right? There’s no telling when I’ll revert to my true form. And when that happens, I won’t be able to control myself. You want me to kill people?”

“Is there no way for us to coexist?”

“Fraid not. The monsters hate humans. I can feel the rage pulsing inside me even now. It’s trying desperately to break out and eat you.”

“But you’re suppressing it with your own strength, aren’t you? If you could keep doing that—”

“All it takes is the slightest hint of anger for the monster to latch on to and take over. And how am I supposed to live without getting angry? I’m already short-tempered as it is. I’m a walking time bomb. I can’t ever go outside like this.”

“But—”

“No matter what logic you throw at me to try and convince me, it ain’t gonna work. You’re not gonna change my mind,” Takuro said, cutting him off. “So be careful. You never know when I might change. If I can’t suppress the monster, run away as fast as you can. If you don’t, you’ll be eaten—”

Suddenly, Takuro staggered.

“Who’s there?!” he spun and shouted.

“What’s the matter?” Hiroshi asked.

“Huh... It felt like someone shoved me...” Takuro answered, bewildered.

Could... Naoki be here?

Hiroshi got the feeling something bad was about to happen. Unease filled his heart.

Then the sound of something scratching against the wall reached his ears. He looked for the source of it and spotted a blue magic marker floating in the air. It moved this way and that, scrawling words across the white wall.

What, you don’t want to hurt anyone? So you’ll sacrifice yourself and stay here? Don’t make me laugh, murderer.

The color ran from Takuro’s face.

You know that’s not true. You’re just too ashamed to be seen in your monster form. Don’t try to act cool.

“Who are you?” Takuro asked, his voice trembling with rage.

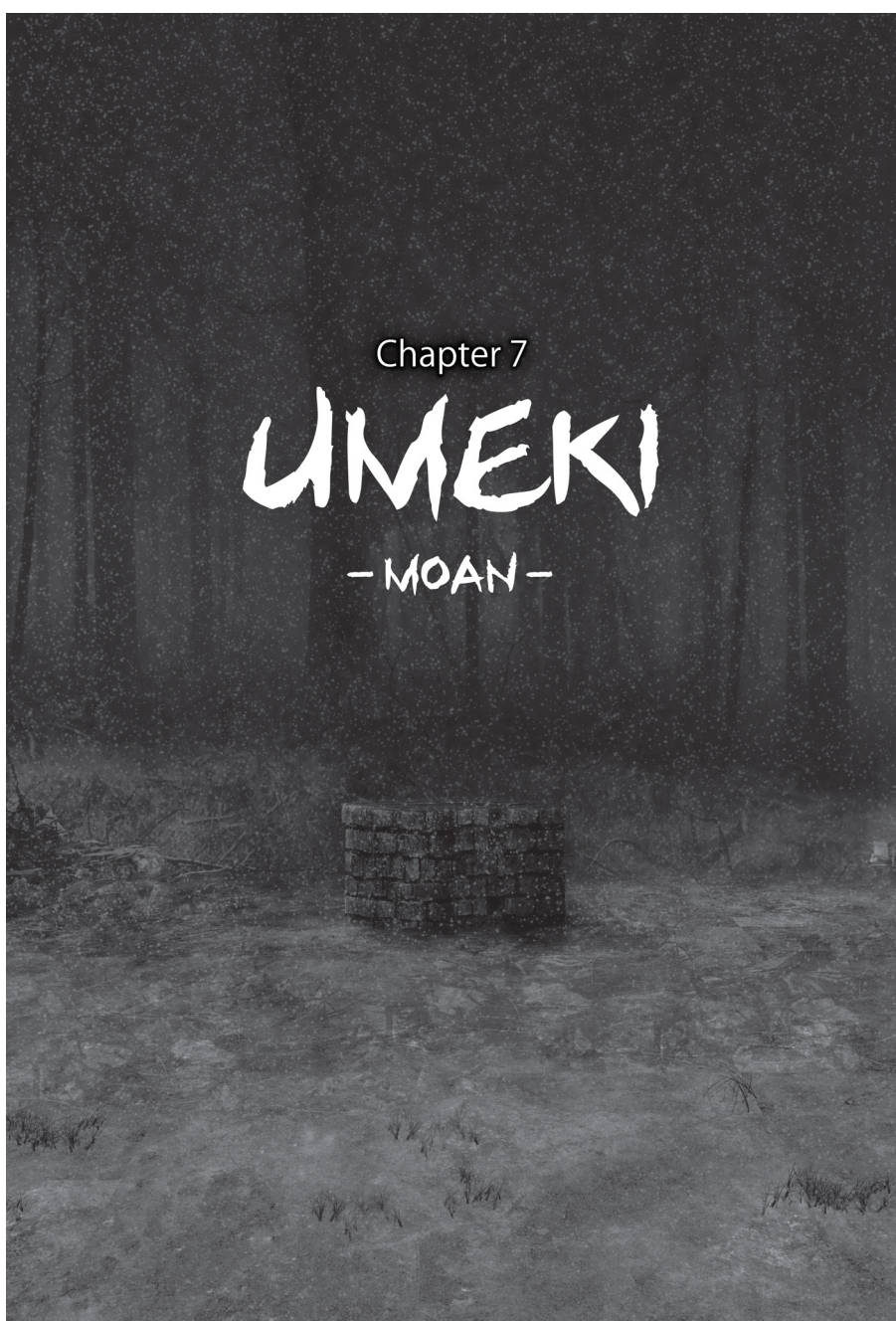
“Don’t, Takuro,” Hiroshi tried to warn him. “This is a trap. He wants to anger you and draw out the monster. Be strong—”

But it was too late. Blue liquid was dripping from Takuro’s skin. A bestial howl shook the room.

Chapter 7

UMEKI

— MOAN —



While conversing with the monster that had taken the shape of Takuro, Hiroshi had gotten it into his head that it might be possible for them to coexist. But in this moment, he realized how silly that notion was. A blue monster with an oversized head stood towering over him. Hiroshi considered that Takuro was still in there somewhere... right up until it mercilessly lashed out at him.

Its unnaturally muscled arm reached out for Hiroshi's neck. He dropped his hips, dodging the attack. This apparently made the monster even angrier. It let out a monstrous, echoing bellow. Hiroshi could feel it shake the very air around him.

The monster faced him and licked its lips multiple times, revealing glints of its sharp fangs. It had survived on only water and a little chocolate for days now. There was no doubt that it was starving. If it caught him, it would gobble him up in one bite.

"Takuro, snap out of it! It's me, Hiroshi!"

Hiroshi tried communicating with the monster on the slim chance he might be able get through to it, but nothing changed. Its thick arms reached out for him again.

It's no use. I have to run.

Hiroshi turned on his heels and fled the study. He ran at top speed down the hallway, quickly going through his potential paths of escape in his head. Most of the doors in the mansion were locked. He hadn't checked the rest of the third floor yet, but it was likely no different than the first two.

Grabbing the handrail of the staircase, he more so fell than ran down to the second floor. The menacing presence behind him told him the monster was still chasing him without even having to look. He took the briefest glance left and right upon coming to the second floor. But he couldn't afford to stop. Most of the doors were locked here, too.

Maintaining speed, he descended all the way to the first floor. The only open doors here were the Western-style room, the toilet, and the kitchen. Takuro had said Mika was in the kitchen, meaning it was probably a good idea to avoid it for now. And the toilet was too small. He'd be trapped in there with nowhere to run. That left him only one option.

Turning left when he hit the foyer, Hiroshi rushed down the front hall. He could still sense the monster behind him, though he'd managed to put some distance between them on the stairs. The monster had been insanely agile in human form, but there was no way

it could maintain that as an unbalanced giant.

Flinging open the door to the Western-style room, Hiroshi jumped inside. He then slammed it shut again and stood next to it, holding his breath. The ravenous monster would surely come barreling into the room looking for its prey. He would use that opening to slip back out into the hall. Once he got out, he'd head back up to the study on the third floor. If he barricaded the door with the desk there, he could buy some time. He could only hope that Takuro's mind would return to him eventually.

The door to the Western-style room burst open with a ear-splitting slam, and a blue figure streaked in with terrifying speed.

Now!

Hiroshi kicked off the ground and darted into the hall. But unfortunately...

"No way..."

He despaired at the sight before him, for there stood the giant blue monster looking down on him with a sneer.

How?

He turned around and saw that it was a different monster that had streaked past him into the room—a rectangular creature about fifty centimeters tall. It stared at him from the sofa. It seemed cute at first, but the dark red stains on its fangs betrayed its monstrous nature. Hiroshi cursed his foolishness. It seemed like he just couldn't keep his wits about him today. This was no different from what had happened in the attic.

The monster that had been chasing him had, unlike the others before it, Takuro's brains. It had probably seen through Hiroshi's plan from the start, and so laid a trap for him. The monster was certainly slower in its giant form than it was in human form, but even then, it wasn't all that much slower than Hiroshi. He should have realized something was up the moment he started to lose it. It must have stopped somewhere to get the smaller monster.

Hiroshi bit his lower lip.

What should I do?

Shun's capture had badly shaken him. And after reuniting with Takuro—who he'd thought was dead—he was simply overwhelmed. This wouldn't have happened before. He wouldn't have cared what happened to anyone. These people were strangers, after all. That was how he'd always managed to stay calm.

"Shun... Takuro... I hate you all," Hiroshi muttered, glaring at the growling monster. "If I hadn't met you, I would have been able to remain perfectly..."

Skree!

He heard a shrill cry from behind. Reflexively, he turned around.

The small monster jumped at him with the same alarming speed from before. Its horribly curved fangs were dripping with blue liquid. This creature may have been tinier than the others, but the deadliness of those fangs was probably enhanced to make up for it.

Hiroshi jumped to the side. The small monster could charge blindly fast in a straight line, but apparently couldn't handle sudden changes in direction. It continued to fly right past him, sinking its teeth into the giant's torso instead. The giant let out a bellowing cry, ripped the small monster away, and smashed it against the wall with a loud boom. Plaster dust flew everywhere. A section of the wall even crumbled, revealing...

Hiroshi gasped. He could see a brass doorknob poking through the broken wall.

A hidden door?

With no time to think, he grabbed it. The small, blocky monster lay motionless up against the wall. It seemed to be completely unresponsive. Keeping an eye on it, Hiroshi pulled on the knob with both hands. The rest of the wall in front of the door crumbled as it swung open. Through it, Hiroshi could see a concrete staircase.

The giant reached out for him again. Barely escaping its grasp, Hiroshi dove headlong through the door.

2

He tumbled violently down the stairs. It was all he could do to protect his head. He hit his back so hard on one step that it knocked the wind out of him. If the staircase had been any longer, he might have been knocked unconscious.

He finally stopped tumbling when he hit a wall at the bottom. It was so dark that he couldn't tell what direction he was facing, if he was lying prone or supine. But there was a ray of light shining down from above. He looked to see the monster staring at him from the top of the stairs. The doorway was too small for it to give chase immediately.

This is my chance.

Hiroshi sat up. His bones were groaning from his little trip down the stairs, but he couldn't let that stop him. Once the small monster came to, it wouldn't have any trouble coming after him. He needed to get farther away.

Eventually, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. What he'd thought was a wall had a cylindrical piece of metal sticking out from it. He gripped it for confirmation.

As I thought.

It was a doorknob. Half praying, he turned it. And, as though fortune had finally decided to smile upon him, it gave way easily. Hiroshi quickly slipped through the door.

The new room was pitch dark. A smell similar to pool chlorine assaulted his nose. Knowing it could be poisonous, he covered the lower half of his face with his right hand while feeling along the wall with his left. Soon he found a switch. He flipped it, and the room filled with light.

“Where am I?”

Hiroshi was shocked by just how different this room was compared to the others in the mansion. It was small, and in the center was an electric examination table like one would expect to see in a dentist’s office... except that it was quite large. It could fit three of Hiroshi sitting side-by-side with ease. There were also thick belts attached to the armrests. Looking closer, there was something similar at the foot of the chair. Were they for restraining the subject on the table?

Next to it sat a variety of expensive-looking devices with all manner of cords and tubes protruding from them. Hiroshi had no idea what they were, but assumed they were some kind of medical equipment. He then looked around the rest of the room to see what else there was.

A shelf stood against the wall, neatly lined with small, labeled glass bottles. Hiroshi approached and reached out for one with a red label on the top shelf. There were traces of text on the label, but it was too faded to make sense of. The other bottles were the same.

In front of the shelf sat an aluminum desk covered in beakers and test tubes. Some were filled with a brownish-red liquid. He brought his nose close to one and was immediately assaulted by an indescribably horrid smell. It made him retch.

Judging from just the cabinet and the things on the desk, this room looked like it could be a school science lab. Was there some kind of experiment going on here? If so, then what? Hiroshi scanned around the room again. The giant examination table with the restraints was really what stuck out to him the most. It was just so big. Would it be able to restrain one of the...

“Oh...”

It was then that a realization dawned on Hiroshi. The exam table was far too big to be meant for a human, but it looked like just the right size for one of the blue monsters. Was this a laboratory created in order study them? That would certainly explain the need for restraints.

Hiroshi’s heart fluttered. What was that blue liquid seeping from their skin? Was their bone structure similar to that of a human? How

big were their brains? Just imagining what it would be like to get the chance to examine one of them gave him palpitations. This would be the perfect place to do it.

Realizing someone may have already done so, he began searching the room for notes. He began opening the drawers in the desk and scouring the shelves, but found nothing other than unfamiliar medical tools. Nothing like a research report. He sighed, fearing he'd gotten his hopes up for nothing as he opened the last drawer. But in it lay an ancient-looking notebook.

Found it!

He grabbed it, his pulse racing. A single photo fell to the floor. It must have been stuck between the pages. Hiroshi stooped to pick it up. It was quite faded, suggesting its age, but appeared to be a family photo of a mother and father with their two children. Hiroshi caught his breath when he saw what was behind them—various pieces of antique European-style furniture, some of which he'd seen in the mansion before.

Were these the residents of the Jailhouse? Hiroshi knew the previous owner was the old shopkeep who'd passed away five years ago. He'd seen him multiple times, but the man in the photograph looked nothing like him. This man was of average height and build. He wore round, black-rimmed glasses and was smiling warmly at the camera. He looked to be about 50 years old. His hair was tied back, and his white-speckled beard hung down to his chest.

The woman smiling next to him had chiseled features and a distinctly non-Japanese look to her. She seemed to be the man's wife, but there was quite an age gap between them. She looked notably younger, and especially lovely in her pink dress. Standing in front of her and the man were two children holding hands. They looked about as tall as the five-year-old who lived near Hiroshi's house and liked to go bug hunting with him, so he assumed they must be around that age. Their faces were quite similar, suggesting they were siblings. They both had their father's eyes and their mother's nose.

Setting the photo down on the desk, Hiroshi opened the notebook. He'd hoped for detailed anatomical sketches of the monsters or a thorough report full of technical terms, but the first page after the cover was just the alphabet written out. And with some glaring errors, at that. Was it a child's study book? As he flipped through the pages, he discovered it to be a diary of sorts.

Two months in Japan

Surprised by resilience of wife and daughters

Ended up at Hongou somehow

I want to learn by TV

*I want to be better too
People getting suspicious not good
But no time to watch TV like daughters
Busy with work
So y not
Practicing Japanese*

The writing was feeble and hesitant, childish even. And corrected with red pen in places. The date at the top of the page was 20 years ago. Judging from the contents of the entry, it was written by the father in the photo. He looked Japanese, but perhaps had come from abroad.

He spoke of his wife and two... daughters?

Hiroshi looked back at the picture lying on the desk. Both children had short hair, so he'd assumed they were boys at first. Looking at them closely, however, they could just as easily have been girls. Hiroshi then continued to flip through the pages of the notebook.

*This country peaceful
I like it here
We are grateful for master that save us
Thank you*

The diary for practicing Japanese hadn't been used every day. On average, it was more like once a week. Sometimes there was more than a month's break between entries, with little progress. The man who wrote it was a professor of science and had, for one reason or another, fled his country and come to Japan. Unable to communicate and with no one to rely on, the person they called "master"—the shopkeep—had extended a helping hand. By working for him, they'd managed to scrape by.

Most of the entries were about the man's daughters. Only their names were written in his native language, something that looked a bit like Hebrew but was unfamiliar to Hiroshi. The man's Japanese was lacking, but the diary entries made it clear he and his family lived a meager yet happy life. The first signs anything was amiss cropped up in an entry dated about six months after the diary started.

——— *seems off.*
Was it the insect eggs found on her?

The word Hiroshi couldn't read was the daughter's name. Unlike her quiet younger sister, the older one was apparently the curious type and a bit of a handful—or so the previous entries had revealed. But

this particular day's entry was strangely short and written in much hastier handwriting than usual. Hiroshi could tell that the man had been quite disturbed. The next entry was dated three days later.

*Settled spasms with drug. Heavy heart.
Do not know how this happened.
Unfortunately it seems to be accelerating.*

Just like the previous entry, this one was shakily written and brief, lacking any real detail. Then, five days later...

*I never expected this to happen.
Quick discovery saved wife.
But the same thing will happen again.
Have to do something.*

Hiroshi had to wonder what it all meant.

A quick discovery saved his wife? What does that mean?

Wasn't it his daughter that was sick? Or were they dealing with something highly contagious? Hiroshi flipped through more pages, one hand pressed to his chest. An ominous feeling was beginning to creep up his legs.

*Two weeks since ——— got sick.
Took day off from work, cooped up in lab.
Still no cure found.
Master says go to doctor.
But that not possible.
Doctors of this country cannot cure.
Same thing as last time will happen.
Have to save by myself.*

The man's efforts to save his daughter continued for several pages.

*I thought I had it this time but no.
I hear pounding on door.
She cries to be let out.
I tell her be patient a little longer.
I doubt she can understand me any more.
Another failure.
Samples keep growing.
Must make new cage soon.
Another failure.
What am I doing wrong?*

*Is this all I am capable of?
Another failure.
My daughter pounds at door.
Asking to be saved.
Sorry.
I swear to save you. Just wait.
It has gotten bad.
Not enough samples.
Must hurry before the worst happens.*

The entries stopped there. The last date was about ten months from the start of the diary, and the rest of the notebook was left blank. Hiroshi closed it, put a hand to his chin, and pensively stared into space. What sort of illness had overcome the daughter? What samples was the father talking about?

Wait... A cage?

Hiroshi suddenly recalled the cells he'd discovered the last time he was in the annex. Was that related? There was still so much he didn't know.

"Ahhhhh..."

In the middle of his thinking, he heard the mewling of a kitten from somewhere. It put him on high alert, and he slowly turned his head.

"Ahh... Ahhh.... Ahhhh..."

No, it could be someone moaning.

"Is someone there?" Hiroshi asked.

But when he said something, the voice stopped. He then recalled a certain line in the diary...

"I hear pounding on door. She cries to be let out."

If the man had been observing his daughter here, then it was certainly logical to think he'd have kept her somewhere nearby.

"Ahhhhhhhhh..."

Hiroshi then heard the voice again. It was growing much louder.

Thud!

The walls shook. Dust fell from the ceiling.

"Ahh... Ahhh... Ahhhh!"

The shaking grew in intensity along with the moans.

Could... the caged daughter still be alive?

Hiroshi clutched at his chest.

No, that can't be.

The diary had been written 20 years ago. It was impossible to think no one had discovered her all this time. And even if she had gone undetected, a restrained child could never survive for 20 years on their own.

The voice was coming from behind the shelves lined with bottles. What if there was a mechanism here like in the study? Hiroshi pushed hard on the side of the shelf. Just as he suspected, it moved. It actually slid quite easily, as if the floor had been lined with some kind of friction-reducing material.

Once pushed aside, the shelf revealed two iron doors. They were both a rusty red, but still appeared sturdy. The left door was sealed with multiple chains, which were connected to the wall with metal fittings and secured with a brass padlock. It was clear something dangerous lay beyond.

Boom!

As if whatever it was had sensed Hiroshi's presence, a thunderous blow struck the other side of the left door. Flakes of rust shook loose from the impact.

"Can you hear me?" Hiroshi asked the door.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The pounding at the door grew rougher, as if to answer him.

"Ahh... Ahhh... Ahhhh!"

The voice grew louder as well.

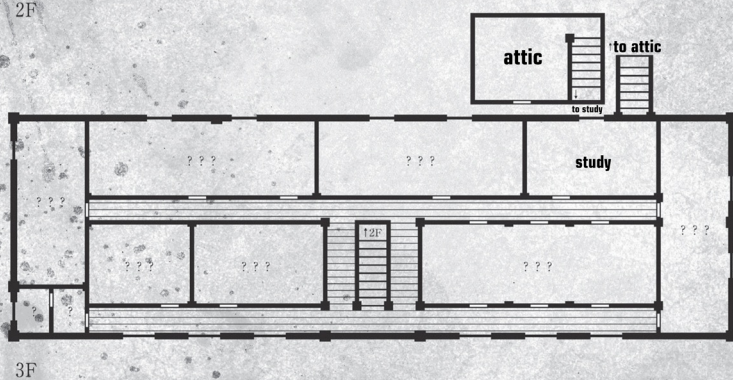
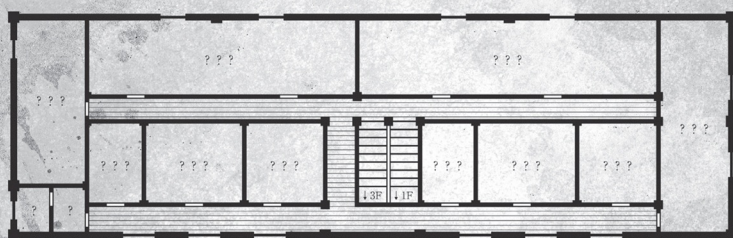
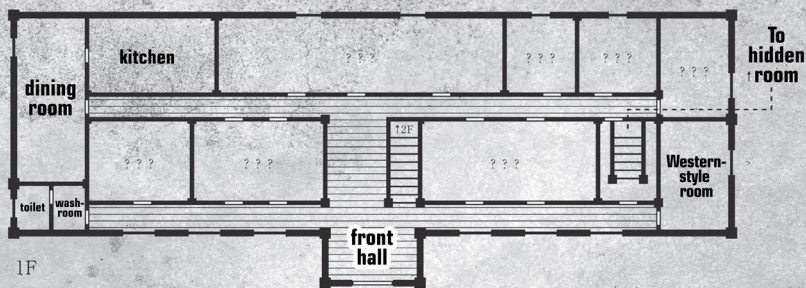


Filled with the urge to see what was on the other side, Hiroshi reached out for the padlock. It was thicker than he expected, however, and it was apparent there would be no getting it off without either the key or immense strength. But that was a good thing. If it had been easy to remove, the trapped monster would have burst out and slain the unarmed Hiroshi. Curiosity killed the cat, as they say. There couldn't have been a more tailor-made warning for Hiroshi.

He was dying to know about the monster trapped beyond the door, but for now he needed to focus on thinking of a way to escape. He collected himself and reached out for the right door. The knob was rusted stuck, but he was able to turn it with a little force. It wasn't locked. Slowly, he pushed the door open, the heavy pounding on the other side continuing all the while.

Hiroshi peered inside. Rather than a room, it was a rectangular underground dirt tunnel that seemed to stretch on forever. Bare lightbulbs hung from the ceiling at regular intervals, providing dim illumination. A chilling breeze stroked his cheek. A draft was coming from somewhere in the tunnel. Maybe it was connected to the outside world.

One ear filled with the creepy, incessant moaning from the neighboring room, Hiroshi stepped into the tunnel.



Chapter 8

SEMEGI

— FIGHT —



Anna picked up the hand mirror by the pillow and fearfully looked into it. She was met with the reflection of an utterly normal girl. She stroked her right cheek, and the girl in the mirror did the same. She smiled at her, and she smiled back. Even her one-sided dimple was perfectly mirrored.

Her chest tightened. A sob slipped out.

Without a doubt, it was her. From the small beauty mark at the roots of her bangs to the scar on her neck from the traffic accident last year, every detail was the same.

But... I'm not me.

Sitting on the bed, Anna shook her head. Her thoughts turned to earlier that morning. She'd awoken at 6:00 AM just like always. Visited by terrible nightmares, it had been a restless night. She woke feeling exhausted and was plagued with a pounding headache.

She'd then gotten up, washed her face, and headed to the kitchen. It was an everyday ritual of hers to make breakfast before her uncle and aunt got up. As she was chopping the cabbage, however, she'd felt a sharp pain in her fingertip. She was so bleary-eyed and spaced-out that she'd carelessly cut herself by accident. Looking down at it, she saw a sticky, blue liquid dripping from her finger. And that was when she'd realized her nightmares hadn't been dreams at all.

In a flustered panic, she'd fled the house. She recalled hearing her aunt call out to her as she ran, but she couldn't bring herself to turn around. She hadn't been back since.

I look just like me... but this isn't me.

She sighed a deep, heavy sigh like she was breathing her last. If she pulled down her lower eyelid, she could see tiny webs of red arteries. The doctor Shun had taken her to the day before hadn't found anything wrong with her, either. But it was all just an elaborate copy.

When she put her hand to her heart, she could feel it beating. When she was hungry, her stomach would gurgle. On the surface, she was no different than any other human. But if she underwent an X-ray, what would it reveal? Her hand holding the mirror began trembling.

Why is this happening?

She'd been constantly asking herself that for the past two days. But she knew in her heart that there would never be a satisfying answer.

When she was alone, her pessimistic thoughts got the better of her. Her doubts grew and grew. It would help just to have someone to

vent to, but even Naoki—who had been with her since the start of this—was nowhere to be found now.

“The new Jailhouse is complete.”

She could still recall the contented look on his face when the game was finished installing.

“The new Jailhouse is complete,” he’d said with a sly smile, his eyes glued to the tablet screen. “The path between the mansion and the annex has been restored. Now you’ll be able to see Takuro and the others.”

“What are you talking about? Don’t start lying to me,” Anna said heatedly.

“Now, now. If you get too worked up, you’ll turn into the monster. Drink this and calm down.”

He produced an aluminum thermos and mug from under the desk and poured her a steaming beverage. How he knew it was there, she had no idea. A sweet scent wafted over to her.

“What is this?”

“Hot milk. It’s cold out today. It’ll warm you right up.”

Naoki grinned, flashing white teeth. Anna took the mug and glared at him as she took a sip.

Not bad...

Remembering that she hadn’t eaten anything all day, she gulped down the rest.

“Takuro and the others are alive, you know,” Naoki said, putting an elbow on the desk and resting his chin in his palm as he looked at her. “The souls of the dead refuse to depart as long as their physical forms still exist. Just like a duckling blindly following its mother, the soul will follow the body wherever it goes. It probably thinks there’s some way for it to return.”

He’d suddenly broken into a lecture.

“Of course, there are souls that don’t realize they’re dead. But even in those cases, they’ll still unconsciously follow their body, I hear.”

For some reason, Shun’s face surfaced in Anna’s mind.

“What are you trying to say?” she asked, not bothering to hide her mounting irritation.

“Huh, as I suspected. If you’re asking me that, then you obviously can’t see it,” Naoki replied gleefully.

“What are you talking about?”

“But I can. I can see it. I can see your soul haunting your body.”

Anna’s eyes shot to where Naoki was pointing. But all she saw was empty space. She couldn’t feel spiritual energy like she did in the presence of the dead, either.

“Stop joking around!”

Even when Anna raised her voice, Naoki’s smile never wavered.

“I’m not joking. You’re standing right next to yourself.

Unfortunately, I don’t have special powers like you, so it just looks like a dim shadow to me. But we’re both still ghosts. I can at least tell that she’s watching you with a concerned look.”

“Okay, seriously, don’t mess with me.”

“I’m not. It’s all the truth.”

“But I can’t see anything.”

“Even the world’s strongest man, capable of easily lifting several times his weight... Even he cannot lift himself. It’s the same principle. Don’t they say that fortune-tellers can never see their own futures? Perhaps your special ability doesn’t work on yourself,” Naoki postulated in a merry tone that ticked Anna off to no end.

“Let’s say you’re right, then. What of it?”

“You still don’t get it? Takuro, Mika, Takeshi... They’re all dead, but have you once seen their souls?”

“...”

Anna shook her head. Now that he mentioned it, she hadn’t.

“I’m guessing their souls are all sticking to the monsters that copied their bodies, just like you are. If those monsters had died in that explosion the other day, it’s reasonable to assume their souls would have been released and they’d have appeared before you. And since that hasn’t happened, I bet they’re still alive.”

Naoki looked over the moon. He was practically on the verge of humming.

“Now, let’s go and search for them,” he said, pulling on Anna’s arm.

“Do what you want. I’m not going,” she replied, wresting her arm from his grasp.

“Why? You said you wanted to be with your kind. That’s why I brought you here in the first place.”

“I know what I said, but I did *not* want to see Takuro.”

Takuro—just saying his name made her sick. She’d always pretended to be fine at school. And she made sure to act completely normal when talking to or about him. But the more anger she choked back, the greater the darkness grew inside her heart.

It’s his fault my parents are dead. I can never forgive him.

“Why don’t you try being more honest with yourself? It must be so exhausting always pretending to be the good girl.” Naoki leaned in toward the silent Anna. “Do you know why I came here with you?”

“...”

“Because we’re birds of a feather.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you just admit it already? You were just using them as an excuse to come here. No... You really came here just to see Takuro.”

“Takuro? I don’t even want to see that jerk’s face—”

Anna gasped when she realized what she’d revealed.

“Those are your true feelings, aren’t they?” Naoki nodded with a smug grin. “I’m the one who lured him to the Jailhouse. And just as I planned, he experienced ungodly horrors before meeting his end. But I’m still not satisfied. It’s not enough. He needs to suffer even more. You feel the same way, don’t you? You want him to taste fear worse than death. So, Anna... won’t you help me?”

“...”

“Let’s kill Takuro together.”

The worst chill she’d ever felt ran down Anna’s spine. Her blood turned to ice. She was so frightened she couldn’t move. Her legs were frozen, making escape impossible. It wasn’t Naoki’s blood lust that scared her. No, it was that she’d nearly agreed.

Takuro... If it weren’t for him...

Dark emotions began bubbling up from the depths of her heart. Ones she couldn’t hold back. Her vision turned red. Her body was hot. She couldn’t breathe. She soon realized that her consciousness was being taken over by the monster’s.

When she was herself again, she’d found herself lying in this bed. Her first thought was that she was hungry. It was a relief.

Still gripping the hand mirror, Anna sat on the bed in a daze. How much time had passed? Suddenly, the door opened. Thinking Naoki had returned, she looked up. But it wasn’t Naoki.

It was Mika who stood in the open door.

2

Anna stared at Mika from the bed. If she’d held the mirror up in the moment, she would’ve seen just how slack-jawed she’d gone. She was stupefied. She was unable to process this unthinkable situation. And the same was true for Mika.

“H-How...” That was as far as she got. Mika too was clearly flabbergasted.

“Oh, good. You’re okay,” Anna said with a smile.

She wasn’t sure whether or not it was convincing. But it wasn’t a lie that she was glad to see Mika safe.

“Anna... What are you doing here?” Mika asked from the door.

She refused to take a step inside. Whether it was because she was

fearful of Anna or worried her true identity would be exposed, Anna couldn't tell.

"I came back because I was worried about you guys," Anna quickly answered.

But that was a lie.

I actually wanted to be with people who knew what I was going through...

No, that was a lie, too. One she'd come up with to deceive herself. The real reason she'd come to the Jailhouse—just as Naoki had deduced—was revenge against Takuro. That had to be it.

"Are you alone?" Anna asked, a smile plastered across her face to conceal her true intentions. "Takuro's not with you?"

"We were together until just a minute ago. I think he's probably lazing about in the Western-style room watching TV or something."

A thick, dark, tar-like substance dripped over Anna's heart.

Lazing about? He's watching TV and laughing while I've been suffering all this time?

"I can't find Fwuffy anywhere, either. That's why I was searching the mansion. I never expected to find you here."

"Who's Fwuffy?" Anna asked, trying desperately to contain her roiling emotions.

"My little friend. He's super fluffy, so I named him Fwuffy. The way he's all aloof and stuff reminds me of Heart. It's really cute."

Heart was the name of Mika's beloved pet Persian cat. The lonely expression that washed over her face when she spoke of it was probably a sign of nostalgia. The sticky substance dripping off of Anna's heart stained the inside of her mind pitch-black.

Fwuffy? Friend? Really cute? How can Takuro and Mika be so carefree?

"Thanks for worrying about us, but we're living here happily, so there's really no need. It's late. Why don't you go on home? Your family must be concerned."

To Anna, it sounded like Mika was saying, "You're in the way. Get lost."

Her vision was going red. She could feel her heavy heart sinking into the black sea of tar.

No. I don't want Mika to see me like that.

Anna took a few deep breaths and suppressed her anger. Remembering Shun helped her keep her cool. Her vision cleared.

I wonder... Did Shun manage to escape safely?

"Oh, so that's what's going on. You're one of us, too."

Mika must have witnessed the spell come over Anna. She sighed with relief and finally stepped inside the room.

"You should have said something sooner. I was keeping my

distance because I was worried I might attack you.”

Mika sat next to Anna on the bed and began swinging her legs. Anna looked at her from the side. They’d never interacted like this before. Even at school, they never talked outside the bare minimum of conversation. Mika was the most adult person in class and gave off an unapproachable air. But the girl sitting beside Anna now was different.

Was she always this friendly? Anna wondered, bewildered. But that wasn’t the most pressing question on her mind.

“You said you were living happily here... What was that about?”

“Just what I said. Takuro and I are happy here. That’s all,” Mika answered, a smile surfacing on her face. She didn’t appear to be lying or putting up a brave front.

“Why don’t you go home?” Anna asked. “I’m sure everyone you know is worried.”

“No way am I going home. Wait... Do you mean you have?” Mika looked at Anna in shock. “You’ve got guts. I could never do that. I’d sooner die than let anyone see me as a monster. Plus, if I hurt someone...”

“So you think you have to live in secrecy here at the Jailhouse? That can’t last forever...”

“I’m fine,” Mika said without hesitation. “In fact, it’s easier here than in the outside world. Besides, I have Takuro. We’re going to live here together.”

Anna snorted in derision.

“You trust him? You’re so naive. He’s rotten to the core. Open your eyes—”

“You don’t know anything! Don’t talk about him like that!” Mika snapped, cutting her off.

“Where is Takuro? I’d like to see him.”

“No way. If you think I’m letting a prejudiced bitch like you anywhere near him, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“...I see,” Anna sighed.

Again, the tar began to fill her chest.

“Whatever, then. You don’t have to tell me,” Anna said as she stood up.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Mika asked, following suit.

“To find him myself,” Anna replied simply.

“And then what? What are you going to do to him?”

“There’s no point in telling you.”

“Don’t!” Mika jumped in front of Anna to block her way. “Takuro is finally paying attention to me. Don’t mess this up for me... Please!”

Mika looked at Anna with earnest eyes. But the more desperately she pleaded, the blacker Anna’s heart grew.

“Open your eyes, Mika. You’ll never be happy with him. You’ve got to know that he only thinks of the people around him as pawns in his little game. Just like when Naoki died—”

“Say any more, and I’ll kill you!” Mika shouted.

Blue liquid began seeping from her temple. She was glaring daggers at Anna.

“Try me.”

Anna returned the look unfalteringly, and they stared each other down in a standoff.

3

The first one to avert her eyes was Mika.

“You changed after getting eaten by a monster. You were always Little Miss Perfect before,” Mika said, her lips twisted in a bitter grin.

“I haven’t changed at all. You just never had a good eye for people.”

Mika narrowed her eyes as Anna taunted her.

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?” she asked, the bulging vein in her temple growing bigger and bluer by the second.

“No, I’m simply stating the truth,” Anna replied with a sneer.

Her attitude seemed to anger Mika all the more. The right half of her face began to twist horribly. The monster was doing its best to break out.

“I never liked you,” Mika spat, putting a hand to the swelling part of her face. “You’re just a suck-up. You pretend to be nice to everyone, but who knows what you’re really thinking behind that cute little smile? I hate your type.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. But that’s why I decided to stop. I don’t care how anyone else feels. I’m going to be honest from now on. So let me warn you: you’ll never be happy with Takuro.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about! You have no idea what I went through falling in love with him! Shut your mouth!”

The air shook with Mika’s rage. She placed a hand on her stomach and took repeated deep breaths. That must have been her way of controlling her emotions, for just as she was on the brink of transforming into the monster, she managed to hold it back.



“I think you’re the one who doesn’t know what you’re talking about, Mika. Takuro is a criminal. He killed Naoki and my parents. You’d have to be crazy to love someone like that.”

“I don’t care. I still love him. I’m the only one who can support him. He even says he loves me when my own family doesn’t. Do you really think I’d abandon him just because you gave me some stupid warning?” Mika spoke rapidly, as if expelling a giant boil of built-up pus that had amassed over the years. “I don’t know why I even told you that. You’re the class angel. Everyone loves you. What would you know about going without the affection of your parents? I bet you’ve never longed for companionship once in your perfect little life.”

“What would I know about going without the affection of my parents?”

Anna’s blood boiled.

“If you can say that without any shame, then I think *you’re* the one living a perfect little life. My parents are gone. Don’t you dare talk to me about loneliness,” Anna spat, letting her emotions take the wheel. “Do you have any idea what it feels like to have your family stolen from you? Can you understand that pain, that sadness? Stop being so naive. You fancy yourself a tragic heroine, but all you are is dramatic.”

Anna’s voice grew louder, unleashing a bit of anger toward Takuro with every word. When that anger hit its peak, she could no longer control herself. Her veins pulsed, growing with each beat of her heart.

At this rate, I’ll turn into a monster first...

“Whatever. We’ll never see eye to eye no matter how much we argue. Let’s just stop,” Anna said, closing her eyes and settling her heart.

“I agree, and I hope I never run into you again. Goodbye and good riddance,” Mika said with finality as she turned and left the room.

Anna slammed the door shut after her, sat back down on the bed, and grabbed the mirror. Once her breathing had steadied, she fearfully peered into it. Her normal face stared back at her. Letting out a sigh of relief, she looked up at the ceiling. She felt as if an immeasurable sadness was about to crush her.

“Shun...”

Her hand to her chest, Anna called his name. She wanted so badly to see him. There was a great hole in her heart. One that likely only he could fill.

Chapter 9

SHINOBI

—SNEAK—



Sitting on the bed and simply waiting for time to pass was worse than torture for Anna. It was just like when she'd lost her parents. The moment the doctor delivered the news as she sat in that hospital bed, Anna's thoughts went to following in their footsteps. But in the end, she couldn't.

For, when she was on her way up to the hospital roof in the dead of night to do the deed, she came across a girl with terminal cancer. She was three years younger than Anna and thin as a rail, probably because of her failing health. Anna could vividly remember the surgical cap she wore on her head and the painful-looking injection marks she had on both arms. They couldn't have talked for more than five minutes, but Anna saw her grimace in pain multiple times before their conversation was over.

Anna had lost her grandmother to cancer, so she knew a little of what the girl was going through. Not only did her illness drain her of all her energy and strength, she had to suffer through one excruciating treatment after another to try and fight it. Day in and day out without a break. The doctors had given her three months. Her odds of making it were slim at best—she'd said as much herself.

"But even in the bitter end, I'll never give up."

Anna would never forget her moonlit smile. No matter how much it hurt, no matter how much easier it would have been just to give up and let go, she still wanted to live. How could Anna even think of taking her own life after seeing this girl who, despite being at the height of misery, was still so positive and hopeful? She inspired Anna, and Anna swore to herself that she'd stay strong the same way. After she was discharged from the hospital, there were times she nearly lost herself to unbearable depression. She would always remember that girl and manage to pull through... But everything has its limit.

"Mom, Dad... I worked hard, didn't I?" she muttered, staring at the floor.

Her eyes stung as giant tears began to seep from them.

"But I'm so tired now... Is it okay if I let go and just end it all?" she asked, but the room remained veiled in silence. "Why... Why won't you answer?"

Anna had gained her special power immediately following the accident. But even so, she'd never once seen her parents' spirits. She couldn't understand why.

Weren't they worried about their daughter who was all alone now? Wouldn't they come check on her? Or were they just too close

for her to see, the same way her own soul was invisible to her eyes? She wanted so badly to see them. She wished for it dearly. She wanted to feel the strong, comforting embrace of her father. She wanted to fall asleep in her mother's warm and gentle arms. She wanted to see their smiles again.

I'm really gonna do it this time.

She wiped away her tears and stood up from the bed. There were so many people throughout the world who wanted to keep living but couldn't. It might have been cliché, but she'd kept going for so long because she didn't want to waste the precious life her parents had blessed her with.

But I'm already dead.

Her life had ended when the monster ate her. And because she'd already passed, surely this didn't count as suicide.

The me right here and now is just a ghost... No, not even. I'm more like a hard drive that's been filled with the details of what was once me. I'm just a programmed imitation. She wouldn't be ending a life. She'd just be deleting some accidentally copied data. There was nothing to feel guilty about.

Anna proceeded down the quiet hall toward the study. Above the study should be the attic. If she jumped from the small door there, it would take her some meters below—straight to the ground. Not even the monster should survive that fall.

It's okay. It'll only hurt for a second.

Cutting diagonally through the study, she slid the bookcase to the side. Upon opening the secret passageway, a sharp, acrid smell struck her nose. The floor of the staircase was oddly black and melted. She needed to hurry before her determination wavered. But when she reached the top of the stairs, something pulled back hard on her shoulder.

"I don't know what business you have in the attic, but I suggest you not go in there."

When Anna turned around, Naoki was standing there.

2

"It's a nest of cockroaches. Open that door, and you're in for a world of pain," Naoki informed her.

"Let go."

Anna reflexively smacked his hand away from her shoulder. Unable to control her strength, she sent him flying into the wall hard enough to shake the room a little.

"That was mean."

Despite Naoki's words, he flashed a broad smile.

"If I weren't a ghost, that definitely would have broken a couple bones."

He picked up a piece of plaster that had crumbled from the wall and continued on gleefully.

"You're not a normal human anymore, remember? You've got to be careful."

That first sentence pierced Anna's heart.

"Would you kindly leave me alone? Once I find my friends, we'll figure out a way to fix this. I was a fool to trust you and come here."

There was no point in getting angry at Naoki. She knew that, but couldn't help herself.

"Oh? Did you find someone already?"

Mika had claimed that she was happy, and it seemed to be true. Resentment boiled inside Anna.

"Looks like I hit the bull's-eye. Who was it, Takuro? Takeshi? Oh, I see. It was Mika, wasn't it? Now I understand why you're so grumpy," Naoki chuckled.

His laughter stirred the flames of anger in Anna's heart.

"I don't understand how she can still smile..." she finally managed to croak, her voice quivering terribly. "I want to kill myself, and yet she... Why?"

"I know how you feel, Anna. You're angry beyond words, right? But it's all right. There's nothing to worry about." The corners of Naoki's lips twisted up into a grin as he stood before Anna. "The reason Mika hasn't lost it yet is because she has Takuro with her. The second he's gone, she'll fall right down into the black pits of despair."

He might be right. It certainly seemed like Takuro was what was holding up her happiness. Anna had no one like that. Nothing. That was the real difference between them.

"Back when Takuro used to beat me within an inch of my life, Mika just stood there and watched like she was bored. Like he was squashing a bug or something," Naoki said. "You're a good girl, Anna. Everyone loves you. So why should you suffer when a cold bitch like her gets to live happily ever after? Mika's the one who should be suffering. So, what do you say? Don't you want to see her in your shoes?"

"..."

"Oh? What's this? I swear the old you would've denied it right off the bat. Could it be you actually want her to suffer?"

"...Maybe," Anna answered honestly.

It was just for a moment, but imagining Mika going crazy with grief and despair after losing Takuro made Anna feel slightly better. Naoki paused there, a shocked look on his face.

“Well, *that’s* new. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“The girl you knew doesn’t exist anymore, right? Oh, wait... My soul is haunting me, isn’t it? Well? Is the real me just as shocked as you are?”

“Like I said before, just because I’m a ghost doesn’t mean I can see spirits as clearly as you can. It’s just a faint shadow of a presence that I can sense. Unfortunately, I can’t tell what she’s thinking.”

“Then let me tell you something. She hates, hates, *hates* Mika for being able to smile even though she’s in the same terrible situation I am. She wants to toss her into the pits of despair herself... That’s what the real me is thinking, too, I’ll bet,” Anna proclaimed with an air of self-mockery. “Surprised? I’m not a good girl at all. I just pretended to be because I wanted people to think well of me. But I don’t need to do that anymore, do I? So I’m done with the good girl act.”

“Hahaha, now that’s what I wanted to hear!” Naoki exclaimed excitedly. “So, Anna... what are you going to do now?”

“Die. I’ll kill myself and end it all,” she instantly replied. “I’ve made up my mind, and you can’t stop me. Really, I’m already dead, so I’m not morally doing anything wrong.”

“The way you’re making excuses is proof you’re still a goody-two-shoes at heart,” Naoki chuckled again.

His ear-grating laughter echoed throughout the room.

“I have zero intention of stopping you. In fact, suicide isn’t a half-bad idea. Once you’re gone, your spirit will be freed from its earthly chains. I can’t think of a reason *not* to do it, honestly,” Naoki said quite indifferently. “But jumping from the attic won’t be enough to kill you. The monsters aren’t that weak.”

The corners of Naoki’s mouth curled into a slight grin before he continued.

“I’m sure you’d die if your head was cut off, but I doubt you have the courage for that.”

Anna bit her lip to hold in her anger.

“I’ll help you think of an easy way to die later. But first, could you help me with something?” Naoki said, drawing nearer.

“What?”

“Don’t worry. With the two of us, we’ll get it done in no time flat.” He brought his lips to her ear and whispered, “Let’s kill Takuro.”

3

“Let’s kill Takuro.”

He’d said it as casually as one might say, “Let’s get pizza.”

“Get this: right now, he’s lying on a sofa watching TV. Laughing

his butt off at some stupid comedy show. Can you believe that?"

Naoki was no longer smiling or laughing. His sly, jovial expression had gone completely stiff.

"How long does he intend to keep adding insult to injury before he's done? I thought I'd have my vengeance killing him... but this makes it all pointless. I want him to experience fear worse than death before dying again. And once he's gone, Mika will fall into despair all on her own. Two birds with one stone, right?"

"Don't be stupid!" Anna shouted. "Murder? I could never do that."

"Why? She's already dead. Morally speaking, you're not doing anything wrong. You said so yourself earlier."

"I know what I said, but..."

"What? I thought you were done being a good girl. Come on. I know you're thinking what I'm thinking... He deserves to die, right?"

She couldn't say anything.

"Just think of all the sins he's committed. He's a blight on humanity. If left to his own devices, there will just be more victims like you and me. That's why I punished him. But... even after dying, he hasn't changed. Not one bit. I was too soft. I need to do something more extreme. It'll take more severe punishment to reform his rotten heart. And for that, I need your help. Unfortunately, I'm powerless here. The monsterized Takuro is too much for me. But you could..."

"What in the world are you planning?"

Naoki broke into a smile once more upon hearing Anna's question.

"Oh, goody, you've finally changed your tune."

"Don't misunderstand. I didn't say anything about helping you. I just want to know more about your plan," she replied, averting her gaze.

She didn't want him to pick up on her wavering emotions.

"I'm going to make him repent each and every evil thing he's ever done," Naoki said gleefully. "First, I'll restrain him in a chair so he can't move."

"You think you can restrain Takuro?"

"Oh, I do. He'd easily break through a normal rope, so I've prepared some strong chains just for him. I doubt he'll ever be able to escape."

"That's not what I meant," an irritated Anna explained. "He's fast and athletic. You'll never be able to catch him."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Naoki said with a grin. "I don't have to. See, I'm invisible to him. Putting sleeping pills in his food is child's play."

"Sleeping pills? He's not human, remember? I'd hardly think that would affect him."

"Well, guess what? All it takes is a large enough dose. I already

tested it—on you.”

“...What?”

“You didn’t notice? Remember that hot milk you drank? I put sleeping pills in there. You slept like a baby after you transformed into the monster. You don’t remember any of it, do you?”

Naoki looked upon Anna’s shocked expression with absolute delight.

“And a few minutes ago, I snuck into the kitchen and dropped some into the soup Mika was making. They’re probably eating it right now and have no idea!” he crowed.

He sounded like he was about to break into song, he was so happy.

“The next time Takuro opens his eyes, the fun will really begin. What should I start with first? I want him to suffer as long as possible. Should I rip his nails off one by one? I’ll make Mika watch as he cries pathetically for mercy. He’s so proud, that should be especially excruciating for him,” Naoki fantasized, licking his lips as he spoke.

For the first time since becoming a monster, Anna felt fear.

Chapter 10

OBIKI

- LURE -



Naoki sat on the desk swinging his legs and looking at Anna with crazed eyes.

"Torture can be so deep, you know?" he said, smiling. "I studied its history and use throughout the world before I died. Who knew that would come in handy now? It could be interesting to try out each and every method."

"...What are you saying?"

"It might be fun to peel off all his skin. Scoop out his eyeballs, rip off his nose... Take him apart, bit by bit. Just imagining it makes me shiver with anticipation. I'm so excited."

He's... crazy.

Goosebumps covered Anna's arms. Naoki was so fixated on vengeance that he'd lost his mind. She could only stare in disbelief as he continued to babble.

"The monsters are quite tough. It'll take more than a little torture to kill one, and that's very convenient for me. What about cutting off his arm and forcing him to eat it? No, what am I thinking? Where's my hospitality? Our guests require much more delicious fare. Oh, I know! Why don't I crack open his skull and give him a taste of his own brain?"

Naoki closed his eyes, a look of ecstasy on his face. It was like he was drunk on his own sick ideas. Just listening to him was making Anna feel ill. She put a hand to her chest and sunk to the ground. Even monsters could get lightheaded, it seemed.

"You okay? You're awfully pale," Naoki remarked, crouching down and peering at her face.

Whose fault do you think that is?

She wanted to scream, but the urge to vomit was even greater. She had to take a few deep breaths before she felt better.

"I hate Takuro..." she managed to gasp. "So much that I want to kill him. But... wanting to kill someone and actually doing it are two different things. Especially with the horrible things you're suggesting. Do you really expect me to be able to do all that?"

It took all Anna had to utter that much.

"No, not at all," said Naoki, drawing even closer. "Girls aren't good with blood and guts, right? I understand. That's why all you have to do is carry the sleeping Takuro and Mika to bed and secure their restraints. You can leave the rest of the fun to us."

"Us?" Anna cocked her head to the side. "Who else is here besides you?"

“Why, have you forgotten? There’s someone else who hates Takuro just as much as we do.”

Shun’s face immediately popped up in Anna’s mind.

“You can’t mean...”

“You’re so smart, Anna. No wonder you’re class president,” Naoki laughed with a satisfied chuckle. “When I stole the tablet from his house, I gave him a dream of you taking it. I knew when he woke up and discovered the tablet was actually missing, he’d come running out of concern for you. Him bringing Hiroshi along was a surprise, but everything else is going just according to plan. Swimmingly, you could say. So don’t worry. I’m sure the rest will work out, too.”

“Is Shun still inside the Jailhouse?”

“Settle down. I won’t do anything to hurt your precious friends. I’m just having him relax in the guest room,” Naoki said, stroking the dangling innards protruding from his gut. “If the three of us work together, I know we can plunge Takuro into the depths of a living hell.”

“I don’t believe it. Shun would never agree to this.”

“See, that’s where you come in. Unfortunately, I can’t talk to him myself.” Naoki pointed a finger in Anna’s face. “So you have to convince him for me.”

Anna shook her head.

“Are you insane? I could never do that.”

“If you don’t, I’ll kill him,” Naoki said with a grin. “And you know that’s not an empty threat, don’t you? It’d be easy for me.”

Anna went pale.

“You... really are crazy.”

“Of course I am. I went through hell and worse, yet no one lifted a single finger to help me. Who do you think could make it through that in their right mind?”

“...”

“Look, I’m not asking for much, am I? It’s not like I’m telling you to kill someone. We’re just cleaning up a few monsters. They aren’t human. You said yourself it’s no sin. Or would you really rather get yourself killed than do society a favor?”

A person ruled by madness had nothing left to fear. Anna had no way to fight back against him.

2

Anna followed Naoki to the guest room on the second floor. The doorknob had been removed so as to prevent anyone from getting in or out, presumably Naoki’s doing. He took a pair of pliers from his

breast pocket, inserted them where the knob should be, and skillfully opened the door. Immediately, someone came bursting out from inside.

“Oh!” Anna exclaimed.

It was Shun. He must have heard the jiggling and hid by the door, waiting for his chance to escape. But he stopped cold when he saw Anna.

“Anna...”

“Run, Shun! Hurry!” she shouted.

But Naoki was much faster than she was. A single blow was all it took. Shun folded like a lawn chair and collapsed to the ground. How could he have dodged an invisible enemy?

Naoki then grabbed Shun’s arm and dragged him back through the doorway. Anna followed. Naoki tossed him into the room and violently slammed the door behind them. It was missing the knob on the inside, as well, meaning there would be no escape without some kind of tool.

“Now, Anna, would you kindly convince our friend?” Naoki asked, pointing at Shun huddled up on the carpet.

She walked over to him and saw his cheeks were covered in tiny scratches.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t hurt my precious friends?” Anna glared at Naoki.

“I didn’t mean to, but they do have to listen when I tell them what to do.”

“Do you hear yourself? You sound just like Takuro right now.”

“Just like... Takuro?”

The smile disappeared from Naoki’s lips for a moment. Anna tensed, worried she’d stepped on a land mine.

“Would you mind speeding this up? Now that I’m a ghost, I’m surprisingly short-tempered,” Naoki said calmly, not sounding angry in the least.

What do I do?

Anna contemplated her options as she crouched down next to Shun, now splayed out on the floor. She was certainly strong enough to break through the door. She could even grab Shun and run. But what after that? She hadn’t seen it for herself, but the front door was likely locked up just as tightly as it had been in all their previous encounters. Was she really strong enough to break down that, too?

Besides, even if she did manage to get Shun out of the Jailhouse, Naoki would never relent. He would just lure them back here again somehow. So what about attacking Naoki, the source of the problem? No, he was a ghost. She couldn’t hurt him even if she wanted to. In the end, her only choice was to obey him and get Shun on their side.

“Shun, are you okay?”

She reached out and gently touched his shoulder. That alone was enough to send stakes through her heart.

“Anna...” Shun’s eyes turned toward her. “Is... Naoki next to you?”

Anna nodded and replied, “He says he has a favor to ask of you.”

“What?”

Shun tried to stand, but winced in pain and grabbed his stomach as he wavered.

“Are you okay?”

Anna caught him before he fell over. She could feel him flinch and hear him gasp.

“...Shun?”

When she looked at him, she realized why. Shun was afraid. And his fearful eyes were trained directly on her.

“Shun... Why are you looking at me like that?” Her voice was hoarse. “Please don’t. I’m not a monster.”

Shun was the one person she didn’t want thinking of her like that.

“The school rabbits went missing this morning,” Shun said, looking up at her from the floor. “There was blood all over their hutch. The whole school was in an uproar. Only their heads were left behind the schoolhouse.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“They found your name tag in the hutch. Can you explain how it got there?”

“I don’t know,” Anna said, shaking her head. “I haven’t been to school for the past two days. I thought my name tag was still on my uniform.”

She withered in despair under his cold stare.

“What? Do you think... I attacked those rabbits?”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s all that blue monster’s fault.”

“But... I didn’t do it.”

Those words left her lips, but could she really be so certain? She had to wonder. Maybe she did it and she just didn’t remember. It was entirely possible she’d been wandering the town in a crazed frenzy of hunger when she stumbled upon the innocent creatures.

“You were also the one who vandalized the graves, right? You might not be aware of it, but your body craves human flesh.”

“...Stop it...”

It was all she could do just to eke out those words. For she didn’t see herself reflected in Shun’s eyes. She saw a grotesque, man-eating monster.

It’s... all over.

Anna closed her eyes. A blanket of darkness fell over her world.

If only everything would just fall dark like this... What was I hoping

for from Shun, anyway? If Takuro can be Mika's support, maybe I was hoping he'd saved me from this pain... I was a fool to even consider the possibility.

There was a major difference between Takuro and Shun now. Shun was human. He wasn't a monster. He could try to be considerate of her, to compromise, but they would ultimately never understand each other.

Slowly, Anna's consciousness began to fade. Apparently it wasn't only when she was feeling angry that the monster could rear its ugly head. Her body was hot. Her vision went red. Her muscles bulged, tearing her blouse. When she opened her eyes again, Shun was staring up at her in shock.

Farewell, Shun...

She sprang at him, her mouth open wide.

Chapter 11

ABAKI

— REVEAL —



Shun woke, shivering from the piercingly cold wind. Before him sprawled a breathtaking sight. Countless stars sparkled in the sky. He'd never seen such a beautiful nightscape before. Had he gone to the planetarium and fallen asleep inside? He seriously had to wonder for a moment.

But it was so cold.

Shun sneezed and instantly felt pain shoot through his abdomen. His shirt was stained red with blood. Seeing it, he finally remembered what had happened.

Anna, after transforming into the blue-skinned monster, had leaped at him with dirty fangs bared. He'd closed his eyes and said his prayers. He'd felt the monster's fangs pierce the parka he was wearing. Sharp pain exploded near his hips. And the next thing he knew, he was being lifted into the air. He nearly fainted at the wretched stench that assaulted his nostrils. Something warm and sticky stroked his cheek. He'd instinctively opened his eyes to see what it was and found a bluish mollusk wrapped around his upper body.

It had taken him a moment before he realized he was inside the monster's mouth. And that mollusk? That was the monster's tongue. Everything below Shun's waist seemed to be protruding from its mouth. He attempted to wrestle free, but the tongue's grip on him was too firm. Suddenly there was a sharp, stabbing pain in his abdomen. The monster had apparently bitten into him. And after that, his vision faded, and he lost consciousness.

Pressing a hand to his abdomen, he slowly got to his feet.

Am I alive? I don't think this is the afterlife...

What had happened? Shun was confused.

It can't be...

When a certain possibility crossed his mind, he immediately stiffened.

Am... I actually dead? Is this just the monster that's taken my form?

He lifted his shirt to check his abdomen. The teeth marks from the monster's bite were still clearly visible. The wound wasn't too deep, and the bleeding had already stopped. If a monster had copied his form, it would have healed completely already. The blood wouldn't be red, either. Shun sighed in relief.

He then looked around the area. Snow covered the ground. Only where he'd been lying was compacted. He was surrounded by dense

cypress trees. Through them he could see the light of the city in the distance. The bright, conspicuous orange neon glow seemed so familiar. It had to be the shopping district by the train station. Judging by that, he was probably in the hills behind the schoolhouse.

...How?

He was alive, despite being attacked by a monster. Moreover, he was now outside the Jailhouse. Shun was beyond shocked.

Eventually, his eyes adjusted to the darkness—or perhaps the night was just beginning to wane—and he slowly got a better view of his surroundings. Not more than a few meters away from where Shun had woken up was a cylindrical structure. His breath a white mist in the frigid air, he approached it. The snow was only up to his ankles, but each step he took was a struggle. Only upon reaching his goal did his frozen body finally unthaw.

The structure was a well two meters in diameter. He peered inside, but it was too dark to see anything. He scooped up some snow, patted it into a ball, and tossed it in. It took a few seconds for him to hear the sound of it splatting on the bottom. It seemed to be a long way down.

Wait... An abandoned well in the middle of the forest? An intense sense of déjà vu came over Shun. Had he seen something like this somewhere before? He desperately racked his brain, but couldn't remember anything. His head just started to hurt. Abandoning the endeavor, he lowered his gaze to the ground. He could hardly believe his own eyes.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me...” The words slipped from his lips.

Giant footprints dotted the snow. From toe to heel, they were about 50 centimeters in length, but distinctly human in shape. Shun couldn't think of any other creature that had arched feet.

Could it be... the monster?

Holding his breath, he strained his ears and listened, but all he could hear was the sound of the wind. There was no sign of the monster other than the footprints around the well. It looked like it had climbed out of the well, walked around for a bit, then jumped back in.

Shun peered inside the well again. He wondered if the monster might be hiding down there, but he couldn't see any indication of that. There weren't even handholds along the well walls for it to climb. It looked like it was impossible to get up or down.

Shun turned away from the well and began heading for the city. There was no telling when the monster might appear again. Careful to be as quiet as possible, he proceeded through the snowy forest. There was so much he didn't know...

Why didn't the monster eat me? If those were its tracks, then what is it doing here? Where did it go after leaving me here?

Shun only made it a few meters before he spotted a log cabin. Perhaps there was a clue to solving the mystery inside. He changed course and started walking toward it.

A sign hung on the front door for the local forest protection agency, but the cabin was in a state of disrepair. It looked as though it hadn't been used for some time. Giving the tilted door a push, Shun stepped inside.

Cobwebs covered everything. The further Shun went, the more of them he collected. He was nearly wrapped in them. He almost felt like he was walking through a giant piece of cotton candy. It didn't help that the place was also deplorably dusty.

Coughing, Shun continued forward. The floorboards creaked underneath him with every step. If he wasn't careful, one wrong move might send him straight through the old floor.

It appeared that the decrepit building had been used as a storehouse long ago. Chainsaws, saws, and other forestry tools lined the shelves. But considering the size of the one-room building, which was really more like a shed, Shun made his way through it in no time.

"What...?" he gasped as he stopped in his tracks.

There was a strange statue in the last corner of the storehouse. It was a sculpture of a giant eyeball about a meter in diameter. From its sides protruded reptilian limbs, and on its back were bat-like wings. Calling it an eyeball monster made it sound comical, but it did certainly draw the gaze. There was just something about it... Shun stared at it, transfixed. In fact, he stood there long enough ensnared by the strange aura of the giant eyeball statue that he didn't notice the monster approaching from behind.

A roar echoed through the air, shaking the tiny building. Clouds of dust rose here and there. Surprised, Shun turned around to see the monster crash into the ground not a meter from where he was standing. It seemed to have fallen through the ancient floorboards. If it weren't for that stroke of luck, Shun was sure he would be dead right now.

Lying on the ground, the monster flailed its arms. Shun had once heard Hiroshi say that the monsters were so unbalanced that it wasn't easy for them to get up once they had fallen. So if he had a few seconds now, this was his chance to run. And Shun didn't hesitate. He slipped past the monster and dashed out of the door.

"Hey, wait!" a deep voice called from behind him. "Didn't they teach you at your old school to help people in need, new kid?"

Shun froze and turned back, peering into the building. The monster, finally managing to lift its massive head, scratched its temple with a guilty look on its face. It was something he'd seen Takeshi do plenty of times before.



Shun could only stand there in awe. Confronted with the unbelievable, his brain had simply shut down.

“...Is that you, Takeshi?” he finally managed to squeak.

“Yeah. You’re pretty sharp, huh?” the monster replied, sitting cross-legged and scratching the underside of its nose.

Shun did a double take. He was undoubtedly looking at a monster, but it certainly wasn’t behaving like one. There was no ferocity to it.

“You’re something else, you know that?” the monster said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“No normal person would have believed that I was Takeshi.”

“Oh... Well, Hiroshi explained a lot to me.”

“Hiroshi? Ah, gotcha. He’s alive, then? Good, good...”

The monster smiled happily. Shun had never seen that look on one of their faces before.

“That aside, what’re you doing here, new kid?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. But what are you doing here, Takeshi? I thought you’d gotten caught up in the explosion...”

“Yeah, that was pretty crazy. But I was the one who set the whole thing off, you know? Haha!”

The monster stuck its tongue out playfully. It was emotional and expressive... just like Takeshi.

“So... you were able to escape, then?”

“I’ve always been good at running away, if nothing else,” the monster said with a bit of pride. “I had planned on dying alongside those other Jailhouse monsters, but in the end I got scared. I frantically looked for a way out at the last minute and spotted a hole in the ceiling. So I jumped as high as I could, hoping it would save me... Turns out these guys are pretty agile in spite of how big they are. Anyway, that’s how I managed to escape the annex.”

“If you were okay, why didn’t you contact us? Everyone was super worried.”

“Don’t be stupid. I could never go home looking like this. Sure, I can transform into a human, but I still can’t control it that well. There’s no telling when I’d revert to my monster form. If my mom saw me like that, she’d have a heart attack.”

A slightly wistful expression surfaced on the monster’s face as it recalled its family.

“But even looking like that, you seem to be in control.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t at first. The monster had complete control, and I was kinda just sleeping, but the brainiac gave me the chance I

needed.”

“Brainiac...? You mean Hiroshi?”

“Yup. I heard him shouting from far away. It woke me up. That’s when I saw him surrounded by a horde of monsters. He was gonna die right there. But the urge to save him overcame me, and I was suddenly able to control my body.”

Takeshi’s tale was too vague to be truly intelligible, but what Shun took away from it was that as long as the right key was used, Anna and the others could regain control of their bodies, as well. Hope kindled in Shun’s chest.

“Can you revert to your original form at will, too?”

“Yeah. Just give me a second.” The monster closed its eyes and put a finger to its brow. “If I focus right here...”

Crinkling its brow, it let out a low growl. Shun watched in disbelief as the monster shrank, its skin going from blue to a more normal flesh tone. All he could do was gawk. This was nothing like seeing a chameleon change its color or a puffer fish expand its body. Just what sort of chemical changes were those cells undergoing? Hiroshi would have loved to observe this phenomenon. In less than ten seconds, the monster was back to looking just like Takeshi. His outfit was even the same as what he’d been wearing three days ago.

“Aw, now I’m shorter than you. I actually kind of like being the monster. It’s way stronger and cooler, you know? I could even send Takuro flying with one hand in that body.”

Takeshi spoke in a joking tone, the same as ever. Shun had once found it grating, but now it was a relief to hear.

“Have you been here this whole time?” Shun asked, taking a seat next to him.

“Yeah. The fire cut off my way back to the Jailhouse, and I wasn’t brave enough to go home, so I parked it here in this cabin and have been chilling ever since.”

“Really? You aren’t freezing?”

“Nah. In fact, for a monster, this is great weather.”

“What about food?”

“Got that covered, too. Whenever I get hungry, I just pop into town and grab a human to eat.”

Shun was stunned into horrified silence. Seeing that, Takeshi burst into laughter.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding! Don’t take me seriously. I haven’t eaten anything since the fire. I feel fine, though. At first I was starving and thirsty, but those were apparently just sensations left over from my days as a human. They faded after a while. I guess that’s just how the monsters are made.”

“Huh? Really?” Shun cocked his head quizzically. “But all the

monsters we've met so far have attacked humans on sight."

"Oh, yeah, about that..." Takeshi, who had been so talkative all this time, suddenly fell silent.

"What is it?"

"The monsters aren't hunting people for food." The corners of his mouth twisting regretfully, he continued, "They just hate humans."

3

An untold number of victims had fallen prey to the monsters. Shun had always assumed that was because they were eating people to survive, but thinking about it rationally, that didn't make sense. If the monsters actually required human flesh to sustain themselves, the body count should have been much, much higher.

"What do you mean, they hate humans?" Shun asked.

"The first monster born in the Jailhouse despised humans," Takeshi replied, scratching the underside of his nose.

"The first monster? So there was only one in the beginning?"

"Yeah. But it's not like they can reproduce, you know. The others are all clones of the first, so we all have Monster Alpha's memories."

"Clones? Do the monsters replicate by cell division?"

Shun recalled seeing one like that before.

"There are some like that, but most don't. They were made by human hands."

"...What?"

"They took Monster Alpha's DNA and literally cloned it. The one that ate me was one of those clones."

Shun's jaw hit the floor. This was something that had never occurred to him.

"Some of them underwent sudden mutation after being exposed to radiation during cell division, though. That's why there are so many different types."

"H-Hold on a second..."

It was all too much to process in the moment.

"What did you mean when you said the monsters were made by human hands? Who would do that?"

"He wanted to cure his daughter," Takeshi said solemnly.

"Monster Alpha was the daughter of a scientist who lived in the mansion. One day, she suddenly grew huge and her skin turned blue. Basically, she became the monster we know. The scientist was hellbent on saving her, and he created multiple clones to that end."

Did he think he needed to replace every inch of her skin in order to restore its original color? Shun could understand the theory, but it

was just far too fantastical. It was like something straight out of a science fiction novel.

“But unfortunately, the monster’s cells could only create monster clones. Try as the scientist might to manipulate its genes, he only ended up creating more monsters. In the end, he couldn’t save his daughter.”

“...”

“He locked his failed creations in the basement. If they were as frail as humans, they probably would have died off quickly. But they’re as tough as cockroaches and have survived years of living hell.”

“That’s why... they hate humans?”

“Yup. They were created, deemed failures, and abandoned. None of it was our fault. We aren’t things. We’re alive, just like you humans!”

Takeshi’s body expanded instantly in his excitement. His head burst through the ceiling.

“Shit, my house!”

Takeshi started to shrink back down, but punched a hole through the wall in his flailing panic. The building shook. The whole thing would collapse in a matter of seconds if he kept this up. Shun dashed away, avoiding falling debris from above.

Hitting the snow outside, Shun tripped and fell. He then heard a thunderous roar from behind him. He covered his head and curled up defensively. The ear-splitting noise soon ceased, and an uncomfortable silence took its place.

Shun lifted his head and looked back. Where the cabin had just been, there was now only a mountain of rubble. A pile of lumber and other debris bubbled up and burst, revealing the monster. Shun breathed a sigh of relief to see Takeshi was safe. But he was holding something... It was the eyeball statue that had been sitting in the corner. It must have been important to him, because he had it cradled to his chest like a mother would her baby.

“Good, it’s unharmed...”

The monster placed the sculpture gently down in the snow, looking relieved.

“What is that?” Shun asked.

“God.”

“I’m sorry?”

“In the Jailhouse, there was this chapel-looking place. This was in there. The monsters all called it God. It’s probably a memory from Monster Alpha. When I look at it, I feel at ease. So when I escaped the annex, I grabbed it and took it with me.”

The strange creature, wings outspread in the pure white snow,

looked terrifying yet also somehow divine. Shun wracked his brain, but couldn't remember anything like it ever featuring in one of his games. In other words, this wasn't something that had appeared because of their connection to the Jailhouse—it was something that had been in the Jailhouse all along.

“...Oh!”

Shun suddenly realized the cause of his *déjà vu* at the well earlier.

“Hey, Takeshi, did you know there was an old well over there?”

“A well? I've explored this place pretty thoroughly, but I haven't seen anything like that.”

Shun's eyes opened wide. His hunch was right on the money. In the alpha version of his game, he'd included an old well in the middle of the forest as an escape route. It was connected to the mansion via an underground path. And it had likely appeared when Naoki installed the older version of the game on the tablet.

“Let's go save everyone!” Shun proclaimed.

“Huh?” The monster looked at him blankly.

“We can get to the Jailhouse from the well. That's where everyone else is.”

“Everyone else? Who are you talking about?”

“You know exactly who I'm talking about!” Shun snapped in frustration. “Hiroshi. Anna. Takuro and Mika, too, most likely.”

“Huh? They're all alive?”

“Yeah, so let's go get them right now!” Shun declared as he took off in the opposite direction of the well.

“Yo, new kid! That's not the way, is it?”

“If this is anything like my game, there should be a rope ladder hidden over here.”

Rolling up his sleeves, Shin began digging at the roots of a great cypress tree. The well was deep, but they could get down safely with a rope ladder. Shun was digging as earnestly as he could to get to it, but he suddenly felt himself floating in the air. The monster had grabbed him by the collar. It was grinning.

“Move. Leave the heavy lifting to me.”

The monster set Shun down on the snow, squatted down, and began digging. The frozen dirt was like sand in its powerful hands. Surely they'd have the rope ladder in no time.

Shun glanced back at the statue the monsters worshiped, then looked around the area. Fresh tracks were everywhere, and the monster's were easily five times the size of his. But that wasn't all...

Monster Takeshi's footprints were flatfooted. His monster form didn't reflect any of Takeshi's physical traits, but this seemed very characteristic of him. The tracks by the well, however, were distinctly arched. There was no way it had been him. It must have been Anna.

But the tracks only went as far as the well. Perhaps she had returned to the Jailhouse after leaving Shun here. He had no idea why she would have brought him here in the first place, but talking to Takeshi had revealed one possibility. Maybe Anna too was able to control herself in monster form. Maybe she'd only attacked Shun to fool Naoki, and used it as a diversion to escape. And maybe bringing him all the way out to the mountains was to show him that the well was connected to the Jailhouse. Or was that too hopeful to believe?

“Hey, I found it!”

The monster raised its right arm victoriously, the rope ladder in its hand.

Chapter 12

TODOROKI

— ROAR —



After attaching the rope ladder to the lip of the well, Shun began carefully climbing down. One slipup, and it would all be over. Sweat naturally began forming on the palms of his hands.

Takeshi had said he'd check out the path before jumping in while still in monster form. Shun had been momentarily concerned, but there was a loud thump before Takeshi's cheerful voice had beckoned him to come down, too. Apparently he was perfectly fine. The monsters were quite sturdy, after all. And so Shun began his descent into the well.

Just as his hands were starting to go numb, he finally managed to reach the bottom. A torn rope ladder lay on the ground there. It must have been the original, probably what Anna used to help Shun escape the Jailhouse.

Shun looked up to see a tiny speck of light. It was the stars sparkling in the night sky overhead. When he realized how far down he'd actually climbed, the pit of his stomach dropped.

"What took you so long? I was getting bored, man," monster Takeshi half-yawned.

The bottom of the well was only dimly lit. There was a tunnel that extended from where they stood, with naked lightbulbs hanging at regular intervals along the way.

"Let's get going."

Shun glared down the tunnel. If reality followed the game, then going straight would lead them right back to the Jailhouse. There was no telling what was lying in wait for them. Steeling himself, he hurried forward. The tunnel was narrow and cramped, so even Shun had to hunch forward while walking so as not to hit his head on the ceiling.

"Hey, wait for me, will you?" a pathetic voice called from behind.

Shun turned around to see the monster flailing about, only its head really visible. Its shoulders were stuck, wedged in between the walls of the narrow tunnel.

"What should I do?"

"Why are you still in that form? If you turn into Takeshi, you should be fine."

"Whaaat? But I like this body better..."

It must have been a dream come true for him to be so big and strong.

"But I can't move, so... Guess I have no choice."

The monster grumbled quietly, closed its eyes, and concentrated.

Then suddenly...

"Shun, get away!" a familiar, reassuring voice shouted from the depths of the tunnel.

Shun turned to see Hiroshi running toward him with a shovel.

"Hold on a second, brainiac! It's me, it's me!"

The monster freaked out, afraid of being attacked while it was helpless, and quickly reverted to Takeshi form.

"Takeshi... You're okay!"

A slight smile cracked Hiroshi's stoic mask.

"Thank you for saving me last time," he said and slowly lowered the shovel.

"That's right! You owe me your life, man. You sure are cold-blooded, coming at me with a shovel like that," Takeshi said in his usual joking tone.

"I'm sorry. But to me, it appeared as though Shun was being attacked."

"What's that shovel for, anyway? Where'd you get it?"

"It was leaning against the wall at the entrance to the tunnel. There was a blockage partway through, but I managed to find a spot where I could feel a draft coming through it. On a hunch, I used the shovel to dig at the spot, which—just as I suspected—revealed a new path. I followed it, and that brings us to the present." Hiroshi wiped the sweat from his brow as he answered. Both his clothes and face were covered in dirt. "The scent of the air changed, so I assumed I was close to the exit. Imagine my surprise to find you two here!"

"Hiroshi, the exit is just beyond. Climb up the rope ladder, and you'll be in the hills behind school. Go, and run while you still can," Shun instructed him, speaking rapidly.

"And where are you two going?"

"To find Takuro and the others."

Shun recalled his encounter with Anna in the guest room. She was talking to Naoki. Shun couldn't hear what Naoki was saying, but judging from Anna's replies, he could surmise that Naoki was planning something nasty for Takuro.

"Takuro should be in the dining hall. He told me he was having dinner with Mika," Hiroshi said and grabbed Shun by the arm. "Let's go together."

"No. You need to get out of here—"

"Are you planning on leaving me out?" Hiroshi asked, fixing Shun with a stare. "I can help you navigate the mansion. I've investigated every nook and cranny, after all."

"...Thanks, Hiroshi."

Shun bowed his head, and Hiroshi gave him a small smile.

"Now that that's decided, we should hurry. Follow me."

And with that, Hiroshi took off back down the tunnel.

Takeshi then turned to Shun and said, "If anything happens, you can count on me. I'm twice—no, thrice the man I used to be!" before taking off himself.

Shun wasn't sure he'd ever been so touched, or so relieved. So many horrible things had happened to them in the Jailhouse. How many times had they been plunged into the pits of despair? But this time would be different. Together, they could overcome any difficulty.

Shun kicked off from the ground, running as fast as he could to catch up to his two companions.

2

I wonder if he managed to meet up with Hiroshi...

After following Naoki's instructions and carrying Takuro and Mika to the chairs he'd prepared, Anna's thoughts turned to Shun. She hated Takuro with every fiber of her being. She really did. The cruel torture Naoki had in store for Takuro was simply karma. And if torturing him would save Naoki's soul, she was happy to help. But she couldn't allow Shun to get involved.

That's why she'd pretended to attack him—in order to fool Naoki and get him out of this. There was a network of tunnels under the Jailhouse, ultimately leading to a well in the hills behind school. This she'd learned from Naoki. So, after ascending the well and depositing Shun outside, she'd returned to the Jailhouse with the intention of leading Hiroshi to safety, too, hopefully ensuring the two of them could escape together. She'd been unsure of how to locate Hiroshi without Naoki finding out, but she got lucky. Upon returning to the Jailhouse, she'd stumbled across him loitering at the tunnel entrance. She should have known. Of course Hiroshi would find the way out on his own. She was once again astonished by his exceptional intellect and powers of deduction.

However, he seemed to be struggling with the last piece of the puzzle—finding the secret path. He just kept going in and out of the tunnel, holding the shovel. So Anna helped him out by digging a small hole in the tunnel blockage, essentially telling him a path lay beyond it, then took a different route to get back to Naoki. The only thing she hadn't accounted for was her weight as a monster, which had snapped the rope ladder while she was helping Shun. But she was sure that Hiroshi would be able to come up with an alternative solution. Anna wasn't worried.

"Still not awake, huh?" Naoki said listlessly as he peered at Takuro's face. "I guess the drugs worked too well. I wanna get started

with the torture already!”

In a corner of the room was a spread of tools Naoki had hand-selected, including a saw, electric drill, pick, and hammer. They all had the Smile logo on them. It was no coincidence that he'd gotten tools from Takuro's father's store.

Naoki grabbed the chair Mika was restrained to and turned it so that it was directly facing Takuro. He intended for her to have a front-row seat for what he was about to do to Takuro. Naoki was getting beyond sadistic.

“Anna, I need your help,” he turned to her and said.

“I...”

“Nuh-uh-uh. You can't refuse. Takuro can't see me, after all. That negates half the point. Which is why I originally wanted Shun's help, but you ate him.”

“...I'm sorry.” Anna bowed her head.

She had to cover up what she'd done or else Naoki would find out and Shun would get dragged into this all over again.

“It is what it is. There's no denying the monster's hunger. Anyway... Now that you've killed Shun, I see your determination is set. All that's left now is to kill Takuro.”

A grim smile flashed across Naoki's face as he ran his hand over the variety of torture tools on the table. It eventually came to rest on the saw.

“Anna, are Takuro and Mika's souls nearby?” he asked, gazing at the serrated teeth.

Anna shook her head. That had been bothering her for a while. As long as their bodies existed, even inside the monsters, their souls should remain close by. Yet she hadn't seen them anywhere. Most people assumed that spirits couldn't interact with the physical realm, but that wasn't true. That Naoki had stolen tools from the hardware store was proof. So if they wanted to, Takuro and Mika's souls could grab a weapon from the table and attack Naoki. It wouldn't actually hurt him since he was a spirit, too. But at the very least they could try and stop him from mutilating their bodies.

And yet... Takuro and Mika were nowhere to be found. They'd abandoned their bodies. Maybe they were grateful that their monsterfied bodies would be killed, or maybe they'd just given up all hope of being saved. Anna didn't know. But if they'd accepted their fate at Naoki's hands, then Anna understood why they weren't here. No one would want to watch themselves being tortured.

What does my soul think of all this? she wondered.

But she already knew the answer. She probably hated her monster copy. Especially since it was a nasty, man-eating monster. There was no point in carrying on like this. She was just a beast that was a threat

to the lives of her friends and family—that must be what her soul was thinking. If she really loved them, she needed to end her own life before she lost the last of her humanity. Anna resolved herself then and there: once Takuro and Mika were dead, she'd put herself out of her misery too just as Naoki had suggested. Then it would all be over.

"I can't wait any longer. Let's just get started already," Naoki said, pressing the sawblade against Mika's arm.

Blue blood dripped from the line of tiny wounds.

"Mm... Mmgh!"

Mika's face wrinkled in pain as she opened her eyes.

"Ow! Eek! Oh, God! What's going on?"

She screamed at the sight of the floating saw. But when she realized she was bound to a chair, a bolt of fear shot through her. Her face paled.

"Now let's get this show on the road and have some fun! Anna, would you be so kind as to relay my words to Mika?"

Anna nodded meekly.

"Good morning, Mika," she said as she slowly approached her classmate.

"What the hell is this? Why am I restrained? I can't move! Get me outta this! Now!"

Anna ignored her and continued, "Naoki says, 'I'm about to begin Takuro's vivisection. Keep your eyes open, and don't look away.'"

"Vivisection? What? If this is a joke, it's not funny." She stared into Anna's eyes and paled some more. "Are you serious?"

Anna nodded.

"Don't do it! Anna, you're crazy!" Mika screamed.

"How could I not go crazy after ending up like *this*?" Anna replied, scoffing.

She was really scoffing at herself.

"I don't want to keep dishonoring the memory of my life. And staying alive only means we're risking hurting others, so let's all just die already."

Naoki had moved over to Takuro while they were talking.

"Stop it, Anna! Don't you dare touch Takuro!"

Mika's screams echoed throughout the room. She was as fierce as a demon, and she glared at Anna with a wicked fury in her eyes. Since she couldn't see Naoki, the saw appeared to be floating in the air. She probably assumed it was all Anna's doing.

"Anna, be sure to tell her that it's *me* killing Takuro," Naoki said, an unsatisfied look on his face.

He lowered the saw in his hand until it was just touching Takuro's right wrist. That was where he planned to start.

"Mika, Naoki is here with us. He's the one holding the saw. He

hates Takuro more than anything. But that's only natural, right? Takuro basically murdered him, after all," she quickly explained.

"Don't play games with me! I've had enough of your crap!" Mika was in no state to listen. "Naoki died in an accident! Sure, maybe he hated Takuro, but the dead can't enact vengeance!"

"I'm right here!" Naoki shouted at the top of his lungs. "Why is it always like this? Why does everyone ignore me? I'm right here! Fear me! Piss yourself in my presence! Me, Naoki! I'm right here! Here! Why? Why?! WHY?!"

Spurred by his raging emotions, Naoki pulled back on the saw. Blood shot out of Takuro's wrist in a small, red geyser.

"Stoooooooooooooop!" Mika cried in despair.

"...Anna?"

Whether it was the pain in his wrist or Mika's screaming, Anna didn't know. But Takuro finally opened his eyes.

"What happened? Hiroshi left, and then I was having some of Mika's soup..." he mumbled, looking at Anna. "...I see. So that's what it is."

It had apparently only taken him a second to read the room and figure out what was going on. However, he didn't show any signs of panic.

"Anna, listen. I've always wanted to apologize to you. I'm sorry for throwing your life into chaos," he said quietly, looking directly at her. "If killing me will ease your pain, then..."

"Shut up! SHUT UP!" Anna shrieked. "It's too late to pretend to be a good guy now! It's too late for *everything*!"

She snatched the saw from Naoki's hand. He was probably planning to torture Takuro for hours before killing him, but the waiting was killing her.

I should kill him right now!

She intended to end everything before her feelings wavered again.

"Ahhhhh!"

Anna shouted and brought the saw hurtling down toward Takuro's head.

"Stop!"

A loud sound came from behind her. Surprised, she turned around. But the next thing she knew, she was slammed up against the wall.

"Anna, I can understand how you feel, but doing this won't save you!"

Mika was standing in the center of the room. She'd busted out of her restraints, their remnants lying on the floor. Anna could have sworn she'd fastened them tightly enough, but the adrenaline rush in the heat of the moment must have given Mika unimaginable power.

“You’re a smart girl. You’ve probably already figured that out, haven’t you?” Mika spat before hurrying to undo Takuro’s restraints, too.

“Don’t interfere!”

Anna got to her feet and launched herself at Mika. She grabbed her by the left cheek and brutishly pulled her off of Takuro. Mika clutched her face in pain and glared daggers at Anna.

“No matter what happens, I’ll protect Takuro! You butt out!”

Mika’s open palm flew at Anna’s face. It struck her so hard she nearly collapsed on the spot. Anna steadied her shaking legs, somehow managing to withstand the blow.

“I’ll kill the two of you and then kill myself. But I’m only doing what’s right! We shouldn’t even be alive!”

“You’re so stupid. Who decided that? Who says we shouldn’t be alive? Everyone deserves a chance to live.”

“Don’t you get it? We’re monsters! Our very existence is a danger to other people! We only bring pain and misery!”

“Why are you jumping to conclusions like that? Don’t treat life like some test at school. There’s not just one right answer. There might be a way for everyone to be happy!”

A way for everyone to be happy? Is there really...?

Her heart fluttered for a second.

No. Don’t get taken in.

Anna focused as hard as she could, concentrating her rage in her temples. There was no point in arguing. She’d just have to transform into the monster and show her who was right. Seeing Anna transform, Mika began concentrating, too. Apparently she also knew how to control her monster form.

Mika’s giant left hand struck Anna’s cheek. There was a ridiculous amount of power behind it. She felt her brain jostle a little in her skull, but she couldn’t afford to go down now. She slapped Mika’s cheek back as hard as she could. It must have torn up the inside of her mouth, because she turned and spat blue blood.



“No matter what anyone says, I’m going to survive,” Mika said, wiping her stained lips. “I may be a monster now... No, it’s *because* I’m a monster now that I’ve realized what’s most important to me.”

She stroked her disfigured head with her right hand like she was brushing hair out of her face, then glowered at Anna.

“I can overcome any obstacle as long as I’m with Takuro. I won’t let you tear us apart. We will survive at all costs.”

“Open your eyes, Mika! You’re just blinded by temporary happiness.”

“How do you know that? You don’t know anything about me.” Mika bared her fangs and let out a low growl. “If you won’t back off, then I’ll just have to kill you.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Anna snorted.

That seemed to touch a nerve. The glinting look in Mika’s narrowed eyes grew even sharper, more dangerous.

“You’ll never understand!”

Mika suddenly leaped at Anna, grabbing her shoulder.

“You’re the one who doesn’t understand, Mika! You’re dead! You’re not you! No one wants us alive!” Anna shouted, gripping Mika’s wrist. “Not even our souls! That’s why they left us! We’re not supposed to be here! We need to die—”

Anna stopped there, swallowing her words.

“It can’t be...”

She was dumbfounded by what she saw.

For some reason, Takuro’s restraints were on the floor. Mika had cut him free. But not monster Mika. Standing by Takuro’s side was Mika’s soul.

“No! Let go!” Naoki shouted as he struggled in a corner of the room.

Takuro’s spirit was pinning his arms behind his back.

Why did they come back...?

“I’ve never hated that me over there,” Mika’s spirit declared, as if in answer to Anna’s question. “I know life is more complicated with that new body, but I still want her to live. That way, I can still be with the people I love. I can still talk to them through her.”

“As if I’d abandon myself when I’m being tortured!” Takuro chimed in. “We were busy looking all over the mansion for a way to help save him.”

“Yeah, that’s how we found this to get through the chains.”

In Mika’s hands were electric cutters.

“No way...”

Distracted by the souls, Anna let down her guard. The monster rocked her with a fierce headbutt, knocking her to the ground. She

tried to stand, but her legs were too wobbly.

I... I'm a man-eating monster. I can't be allowed to live. I have to die. I have to kill Takuro and Mika, and then it's my turn.

Suddenly, tears began overflowing her eyes.

"Don't be so hard on yourself..."

She heard a faint voice from somewhere. Was it hers...?

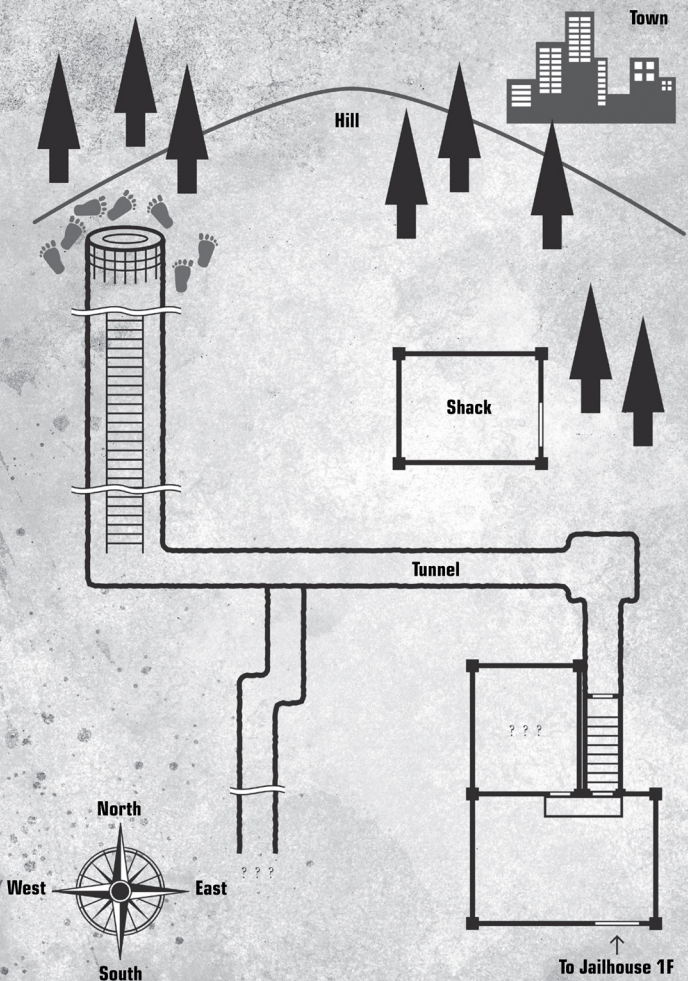
"I feel the same way they do. Right now, I can't talk with anyone. I can't relay my feelings, but you're different."

She felt a warmth at her feet. That must be where *she* was.

"Are you saying... it's okay for me to live?" Anna asked herself between sobs.

She could swear the faint shadow at her feet nodded.

Map of Outer Mansion



Chapter 13

OVERWRITE

Upon making their way through the underground passage and arriving at the mansion, Hiroshi, Takeshi, and Shun were greeted with a fearsome, echoing roar.

“Let’s hurry,” Hiroshi urged as they ran.

Cutting across the entrance hall toward the source of the noise, they came to a bedroom door that had previously been locked. But when they tried it now, the knob turned easily and the door swung open to reveal a strange, grisly sight. In the center of the room were two large, sturdy chairs. Takuro was sitting in one of them, and he appeared to be injured. Blue liquid was gushing from his right wrist.

On the far side of the room were two giant figures. One was sitting slumped against the wall... crying, was it? There was a terribly sad yet relieved look on its face. The second giant figure was standing next to it, and it whipped around to face Shun and the others when they entered.

“Oh. What’s up, guys?”

Its voice was gravelly and low, but they could still tell it was Mika’s right away. Just like Takeshi, it seemed she’d figured out how to control her monster form.

“Takuro, are you okay?” monster Mika asked as it ran to the injured Takuro’s side.

“Yeah... Sadly, I managed to escape death,” he answered.

Without warning, the monster slapped him across the face. The force of the blow toppled the chair and dumped Takuro on the floor.

“Ow...” Holding his still-stinging cheek, he looked up in surprise. “What the hell was that for?”

“‘Sadly’?! What, were you planning on dying and leaving me alone? Don’t be ridiculous!”

As the monster shrieked at Takuro, it slowly began to shrink, eventually returning to human form.

“You’ve still got things you need to do,” Mika continued, tossing a glance at the other monster slumped against the wall.

“...Right. Sorry.”

“I don’t know how, but I’ll help any way I can. Let’s make up for our sins together, Takuro.”

Takuro gave an adamant nod, seemingly inspired by Mika’s words. Leaving them to talk things out, Shun slipped past both of them and strode toward the last monster. Something was dripping from its forehead. It looked like it might be hurt. And most likely... it was Anna.

“Shun...” The monster quickly hid its face when it spotted him approaching. “No, don’t... Don’t look at me. I’m hideous.”

“Oh, thank goodness... Just like I thought, you’re able to control the monster, too.”

Without the slightest hint of hesitation, Shun reached out and grabbed the monster’s—Anna’s—hand. What reason did he have to be afraid? No matter what she looked like, if she had Anna’s memories, then she was still Anna to him.

“Thanks for saving me earlier, Anna.”

The moment Shun said her name, her body began to shrink and reshape. Within a few moments, she looked like herself again.

“Shun...”

Tears streaming down her face, Anna hugged him. It was a joyous moment, but she didn’t quite know her own strength. Shun coughed a little. She was crushing his ribs.

“Oh, sorry!”

Anna quickly let go of him. They looked at each other and laughed. Then...

A deafening explosion rocked their eardrums. The whole mansion shook. All six of them dashed out of the room to see what had happened and were aghast at what they discovered.

The Jailhouse was engulfed roiling flames.

2

“Whoa! What is this?!” Takeshi’s eyes were wide with shock.

Fear was writ all over his face, but he hadn’t fallen into a full-blown panic like normal. After all the horrors he’d witnessed, and after gaining his newfound superhuman strength, his mind must have toughened up a little, as well. And it wasn’t just Takeshi. Everyone seemed to be keeping their cool despite the raging fire.

“This must be Naoki’s doing,” said Anna, and everyone turned to look at her. “I assumed he ran away after his plan was foiled, but I guess he still had something up his sleeve. We should get out of here pronto.”

“Agreed. And in that case, let’s get moving,” Hiroshi seconded.

“But how *do* we get out of here?” Takuro asked.

“There’s a tunnel that leads to a well we can climb out of. If we can make it there, we’re home free,” Shun answered.

“But...”

Takuro and Mika looked at each other hesitantly. They seemed unsure whether or not they should return to the outside world.

“We can think about the future once we’re out of here,” said

Anna. "If we don't hurry, we'll all be burned alive."

The flames were getting thicker and higher. It was only a matter of time before the entire mansion was reduced to cinders.

"Yeah, let's go! Everyone, follow me!" Takeshi shouted and set off.

"Be careful, Takeshi. It's dangerous to inhale smoke. Stay as low as possible and cover your mouth—"

"Shaddup, brainiac. I know my basic fire safety. Come on already! Let's—ow! Hot, hot, hot!"

A stray ember had landed on the arm Takeshi was beckoning to his friends with. His eyes went wide as he frantically waved it around to extinguish it.

"Are you okay?"

"This is nothing; I'm invincible! Now, follow me!"

Shun and the others chased after the eager Takeshi, making their way down the dark staircase. They burst into the laboratory and quickly shut the thick metal door behind them. Hopefully it would keep the flames at bay.

"We should be fine here—"

Takeshi suddenly stopped midsentence. His eyes were focused on one point. Everyone's were.

There were two other doors in laboratory, you see. The one on the right led to the well. And the other, the left door... The heavy padlock that had once sealed it now lay undone on the floor.

Boom!

There was a loud, heavy thud on the other side of the door, and it slowly began to open.

"AhhhhHHHhhhHHH!"

A deep, guttural bellow that sounded like it came from the bowels of hell rattled everything in the room. And out from the creaking door stepped a blue-skinned monster.

"Is that... Monster Alpha?" Takeshi whispered.

"Are you... the daughter of the man who lived here?" Shun heard Hiroshi ask.

"Hurr... Ahh... AhhhHHHHH!"

The monster howled again, sending shivers down Shun's spine. It looked just the same as the other monsters they'd encountered, but something was different about this one. Something dark. It was like it was radiating an aura of pure hatred. There was no way they'd stand a chance in a fight against it. Somehow, everyone seemed to share that singular thought.

"AhhhhHHHHH!"

Roaring, the monster charged. Abject madness raged in its eyes. Everyone managed to scatter in time, evading its lunge by a hair's breadth. It caught the examination table in the middle of the room

instead, splintering it into a million pieces in the blink of an eye. Despite its years of incarceration, it seemed the monster's strength hadn't waned in the slightest.



The monster then looked at the six of them in turn, its eyes stopping on Mika. Her hairpin glinting in the sterile light of the overhead fixtures seemed to have caught its attention. It let out an especially loud roar before charging straight at her, spittle flying in every direction.

“Mika!”

Takuro made a mad dash to rescue her, but the monster was just too fast. Its red-stained fangs were flying at Mika with terrifying speed.

Skree!

With a high-pitched screech, a small, blue blur streaked through the air. It flew faster than the eye could follow and sunk its teeth into the bigger monster’s shoulder. It let out a half-scream, half-bellow and stumbled backward.

“Fwuffy! Did you come to save me? Thank you!”

Mika held her arms out and the block-like monster jumped into her embrace like a beloved pet. The larger monster it had just fended off was still clutching its shoulder and reeling.

“Let’s move!” Takuro rallied.

At his signal, everyone ran through the door on the right and kept on down the dimly-lit passageway. Shun took a glance behind them and saw the monster’s face beyond the door. It was glaring unblinkingly at them. It was unsettling, but the giant monster was far too large to chase after them in such a narrow space.

Yet even so, they couldn’t afford to be complacent. The group kept running even after it was long out of sight, and eventually reached the base of the well.

“Is this where we go up?” Mika asked, holding the small monster to her bosom.

She didn’t look happy.

“Oh, that’s right. I remember now. You’re afraid of heights, aren’t you? Will you be okay?” Hiroshi asked, peering at her face with concern.

“No sweat,” Takuro cut in, wrapping an arm around her shoulder. “Mika, everyone’s changed, don’t you think? Hiroshi, Takeshi, Anna, and Shun... They’ve all really matured, haven’t they?”

“...Yeah.”

“And so have you. People can change. They can conquer any weakness. I may have attacked Hiroshi earlier, but I swear I’ll never let myself lose control like that again. So let’s give this a try. If we’re together, it’ll be easy, right?”

Mika nodded.

“Takuro... You’re really the one who’s changed the most, you

know,” she said before approaching the dangling rope ladder.

“All right, I’ll take the lead! That way you can stare at my butt and not feel scared,” Takeshi said, proudly pounding his chest.

“Idiot. Who wants to be stuck staring at your butt forever? Anna, would you mind?”

“No, not at all. I’ll go first,” Anna answered with a smile.

“Then what can I help with?”

“Hold Fwuffy for me,” Mika said, thrusting the small monster at Takeshi.

“Huh? Whoa, hold on! It’s not gonna bite me, is it?” Takeshi stared at the rectangular creature, surprise plastered on his face.

“Don’t come crying to me if you provoke it,” Mika said, grasping the rope ladder.

“Shun and I will support you from behind. Just follow our instructions, and this will be a walk in the park,” Hiroshi chimed in with an offer of encouragement.

“I’ll wait here until you’re all up. Don’t worry if you happen to slip. I’ll catch ya,” added Takuro.

Hearing his reassurance, Shun felt a sense of solidarity he’d never experienced before. Just because they escaped the Jailhouse didn’t mean all their problems would be solved. This would surely only be the beginning of the difficulties they’d encounter in the future. But so what? The six of them could overcome it all by working together.

“People can change. They can conquer any weakness.”

Takuro’s words had given him courage that soaked his heart.

“Mika, just stay calm. And whatever you do, don’t look down,” Anna said.

“Your buddy’s cheering for you, too... Hey, settle down! Ow! That hurts, damn it!”

Normally Takeshi’s loud voice was too much for Shun, but it was as pleasant as could be right now.

“That’s the way, Mika. One hand after the other.” Hiroshi’s words of encouragement echoed in the corridor.

“Almost there!” Takuro shouted.

In a matter of minutes, all six of them were safely up and out of the well—out of the Jailhouse. Things were already getting lighter. The eastern sky was painted in the warm glow of the rising sun.

“We did it. We all escaped alive,” Takuro said, sticking out his hand.

Everyone placed theirs on top of his, one after another. There was a smile on each of their faces. Most of them hadn’t slept a wink since the day before. They were all exhausted, but their hearts were full to bursting. As they laughed at each other’s tired and dirty faces, a warm wind suddenly blew through their huddle.

“Not so fast. Don’t think this is over,” a seventh voice said coldly.

“Hey... Look,” Mika said, her face suddenly seized with fear.

“Over there.”

She was pointing behind them. Her eyes were wide, her dilated pupils fixated on... something.

“Don’t even try it. I’m not the same guy I used to be,” Takeshi joked with a bright smile as he turned to look over his shoulder.

“You’re just trying to scare me, right? Well, there’s no way I’m falling for it—”

Takeshi’s bravado ended in a small yelp. Unease mounted in Shun’s chest. He could feel the tension in the air.

This should be the end of the game, right? Please... Please let it all be over.

Praying, Shun slowly turned to look where Takeshi was now staring, too. A lone boy was crawling out of the well. He sat down on the edge and slowly lifted his face. The corners of his lips curled into a faint smile.

“I would say it’s been a while, but I’ve been watching you all this whole time,” the boy said, swinging his legs. “Ah, man, it was fun watching you all cry and scream as the monster chased you.”

The boy then looked to the sky. Shun didn’t recognize him, but it seemed everyone else did.

“It can’t be...” Mika’s face was still frozen in fear.

“H-H-How’re you...” Takeshi stammered.

“Naoki...” Takuro muttered.







**"YOU LOOK LIKE
YOU'VE SEEN A GHOST"**

Shun had never seen Naoki before, but he wasn't anything like he'd imagined. Since he'd been bullied by Takuro, too, Shun had assumed he was meek and mild-mannered just like he was. But the boy sitting before him now was different. He had an aura about him that was darker than even Takuro's on his worst days.

"Huh? You can all see him, too?" Anna asked, bewildered. "How?"

"Takuro, don't think you're out of the woods yet. I'm never going to forgive you."

Ignoring Anna, Naoki approached Takuro. As if sensing the darkness in him, Takuro instinctively backed up.

"So, this was all your doing, was it?"

"Yes, although I can't take credit for creating the monsters. Unfortunately, I don't have that kind of power. All I can do is manipulate dreams. But thanks to that, everything has gone pretty much according to plan." Naoki continued, his eyes fixated on Takuro, "With that, I got your father to buy the Jailhouse. I invaded his dreams over and over until he was convinced. I even lured all of you here. You had no idea, did you? You thought you were acting of your own free will, but it was me controlling you all along."

"If you hate me so much, then why didn't you just focus on me? Why bring the others into it?"

"Because they're equally guilty. They simply watched and laughed at what you did. They never did a thing to help me."

Takeshi and Mika both looked away awkwardly.

"Well, we were killed and eaten by the monsters—just like you wanted. Are you happy now? Just pass on already."

"That was the plan at first. I thought your deaths would satisfy my vengeance. But I didn't feel better in the least. In fact, my heart began to ache even worse. Why was that? After thinking about it for some time, something finally dawned on me." Naoki stared right at Takuro and grinned. It was an innocent smile... One so out of place that it felt all the more sinister. "Did you think about me when the monster killed you?"

"...No."

"Did any of you? I doubt any of you realized *I* had killed you. Which means it was all pointless. You were supposed to regret everything you'd done to me and beg for my forgiveness as you died like dogs." Naoki's smile vanished as he continued, "But no matter what I did, not one of you was thinking of me. It was because I was

just a ghost, right? I wasn't *really* there to you. But don't you worry. I've fixed that now. I got myself a body, so now I can finally have my true vengeance."

"You got yourself a body? How?"

"The same way you all did. The Jailhouse monsters can transform into the creatures they consume, remember?"

"But you were already dead... You couldn't possibly have been eaten by a monster."

"Who said that I needed to be alive for it to work? Have you ever considered the details? Takeshi's head got left behind, but the monster had no problem transforming into him. As long as there's DNA to replicate, that's all they need."

"No... Don't tell me you're the one who tore up the graveyard..." Hiroshi piped up.

"Correct! That's the smartest kid in class for you," Naoki said, offering a round of applause. "I took my remains from my own grave. I thought I could materialize like you guys if I fed them to a monster. I'd about given up hope, though, since I thought you guys were the only monsters left alive. But then—lucky me—I found one last monster imprisoned in the basement."

"And you fed it your remains?" Takuro asked.

"Precisely. And now... Now I can at last have my vengeance. *Real* vengeance," Naoki declared as he began skipping about in celebration.

"If you were just after your remains, couldn't you have left the other graves alone?" Shun asked. "Why did you disturb them, too?"

"Don't you get it? That was to lure you to the Jailhouse," Naoki answered. "I figured if I messed up the place, you'd think it was Anna's doing. That made it easier to convince you to come."

"Wait, did you kill the school rabbits, as well?"

"Bingo! I knew if I could get you to think Anna was out there wreaking havoc every night, it'd be a piece of cake to use your dreams to manipulate you. And the result was a rousing success! You came rushing to the Jailhouse after your beloved. Seriously, it was all going so well... Where did I screw up?"

"Why... did you want me to come here?" Shun asked, his voice trembling.

"Because every great magician needs a charming assistant," Naoki answered plainly.

"Assistant?"

"Yes, an assistant," Naoki replied, walking over to Shun and grasping both of his hands tightly. "I still haven't given up, you know. After all, you're just like me, Shun. The truth is that you hate everyone so much there aren't words to describe it. Well, now's your time! Let's have our vengeance together!"

Naoki's body began expanding before he even finished speaking.

"You should all probably start running now. I'm still not used to this form. I can't control it as well as you guys can. I might just kill you instantly. Ah... I can feel it flowing through me. This monster's hatred for humans is just amazing. It's so deliciously dangerous. I'm getting chills. Ahhh...."

Naoki continued to swell and transform. He grew bigger than any of the monsters they'd seen before.

"Now... Let's play our final round of tag, shall we?"

The monster's ghastly howl shook the cold morning air.

Afterword

I'm proud to bring you the fourth installment in the *Ao Oni* novel series. Back in the afterword for the first volume, I said that I'd love to write more adventures with Hiroshi and the gang, but never in my wildest dreams did I think the story would continue this far. Nor did I expect two movie adaptations, tag-teaming with Ms. Karin Suzuragi on both the light novels *and* a manga, and seeing various *Ao Oni* merchandise getting produced. The world of *Ao Oni* continues to expand before me. And it's all thanks to you fans who support *Ao Oni*. Thank you so much.

Now then... As I said in the interview for the official fan guidebook, we saw Shun undergo dramatic growth in volume one, Takuro in volume two, and Takeshi in volume three. So, this time, I tried turning the spotlight on our two heroines—Mika and Anna. They both experienced the same tragedy last volume, but in this one, their roles couldn't be more different. There's even a never-before-seen epic showdown between our two leading ladies toward the end, so if you haven't actually read the book yet, look forward to it. We also get a little light shone on the story of the blueberry-colored monster shrouded in so much mystery. Not everything is explained yet, however. Just what *is* the monster? I'd love to hear all of your theories.

Now, those of you who have already finished reading the book may have noticed, but this volume is based on version 1.1, which means I've now exhausted all of the original game material. What happens next then, you ask? That's a good question. On that note, please look forward to the next volume, where all the mysteries will be answered (maybe)!

Kenji Kuroda

THE MOVIE AO ONI VER2.0 RELEASED WITH THIS VOLUME, AND I ENJOYED THAT A LOT TOO. I HOPE YOU GO AND SEE IT. I'M GOING TO DO MY BEST TO CONTINUE TO MAKE THINGS EXCITING, SO I'D BE VERY HAPPY IF YOU STUCK AROUND TILL THE END!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR STAYING WITH US SO FAR! I QUITE ENJOYED THE THRILL OF BEING A READER FOR THIS VOLUME, AS WELL. IN THIS VOLUME WE FINALLY SEE KAZUYA AND NAOKI COME TO THE FOREFRONT, WHICH WAS EXCITING. I WAS ALSO ON MY TOES DURING THE ANNA VS. MIKA FIGHT, WHICH NORMALLY WE'D NEVER SEE BUT IT WAS UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL! THE NOVELS OFFER ONE PERSPECTIVE ON NAOKI, BUT IF YOU'D LIKE, I'D APPRECIATE IF YOU CHECKED OUT THE MANGA VERSION OF AO ONI THAT I'M ALSO DRAWING RIGHT NOW. YOU GET TO SEE HIM BEFORE THE ACCIDENT.





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